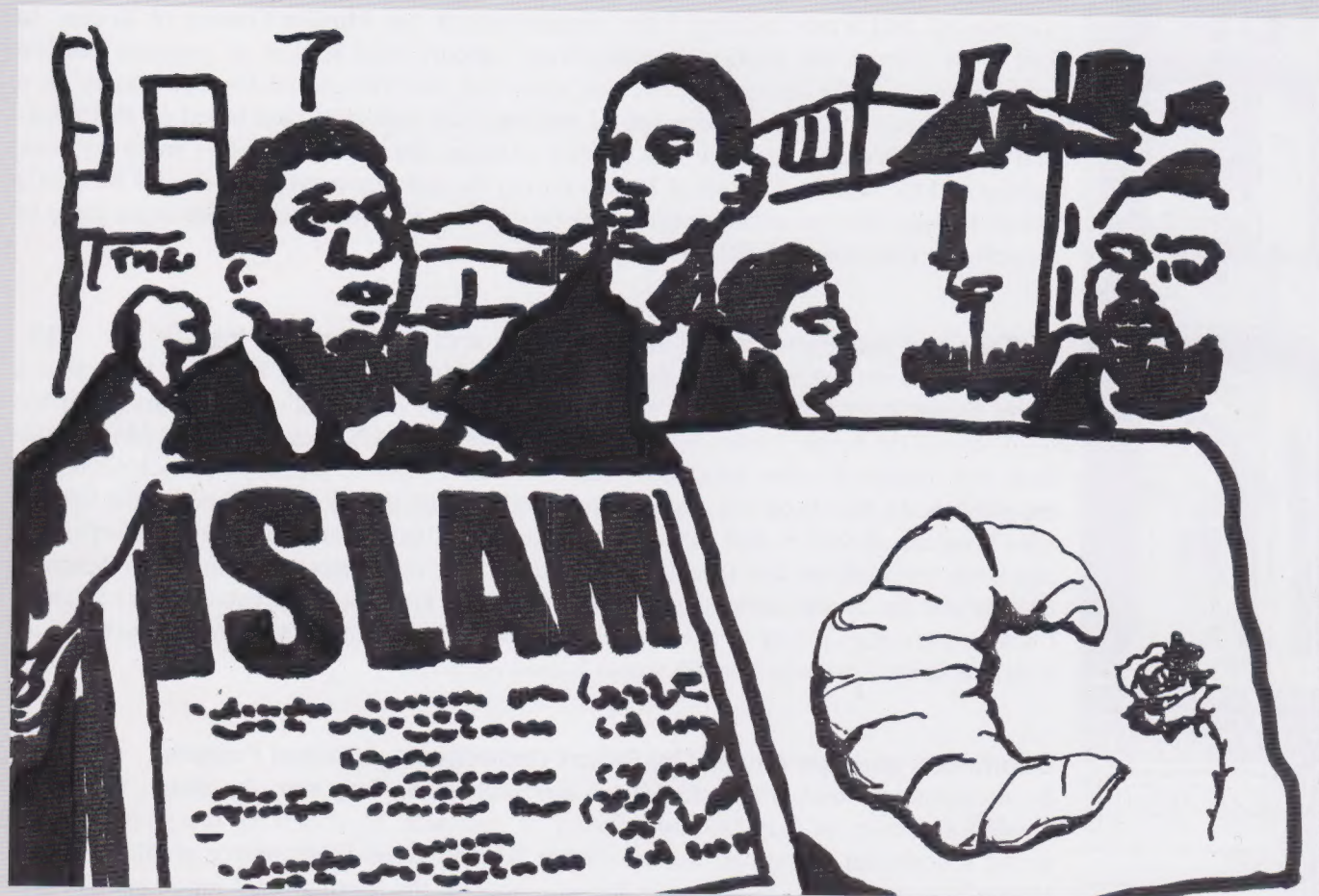


Aufheben



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New Labour, communalism, and the rise of muslim Britain

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Following the war in Iraq, New Labour were criticized by some on the left for 'Islamophobia'. However, behind the surface tensions between leading Labour politicians and representatives of the 'British muslim community' there is a history of political symbiosis. In Part 1 we see how the rise of New Labour to power has been accompanied by the emergence of 'multiculturalism' and the ideology of 'communalism', which was based on a new, bourgeois, concept of 'community'. In Part 2 we look at the history of the concrete Asian communities in Britain, how these communities changed with their interaction with advanced British capitalism, and how the recent emergence of the ideology of political Islam has helped creating a new, abstract concept of the 'British muslim community' and a new national lobby representing it: the Muslim Council of Britain. In Part 3 we discuss the relation between New Labour, local leaders of concrete muslim communities and the national lobby, and show that the 'British muslim community' is a complex socio-political construct, full of metaphysical subtleties, and based on this three-fold relation. We also see how this relation explains the political choices made by New Labour and the Muslim Council of Britain during the anti-war movement, as well Respect's failure to make their political breakthrough by winning over the muslim vote in the wake of the anti-war movement of 2002-3.

Al-Sadr and the Mahdi army: Sectarianism and resistance in Iraq

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Largely unknown before the fall Saddam Hussein, Muqtada al-Sadr has risen to become a major figure in Iraq over the past five years. For many in the anti-war movement, he has been seen as the heroic leader of the Iraqi resistance to the US occupation. Yet Muqtada al-Sadr still remains a rather enigmatic figure. The investigative journalist Patrick Cockburn has published a new book *Muqtada al-Sadr and the Fall of Iraq* that claims to shed light on who Muqtada al-Sadr is and the nature of his Sadrist movement. In our review article on this book, we shall see that Cockburn ends up as little more than an apologist for Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist movement. However, despite the apologetic nature of his account, Cockburn provides plenty of evidence for the sectarian and collaborationist character of al-Sadr, the Sadrist movement and political Islam in general.

Capitalism and spectacle: The Retort Collective's Afflicted Powers

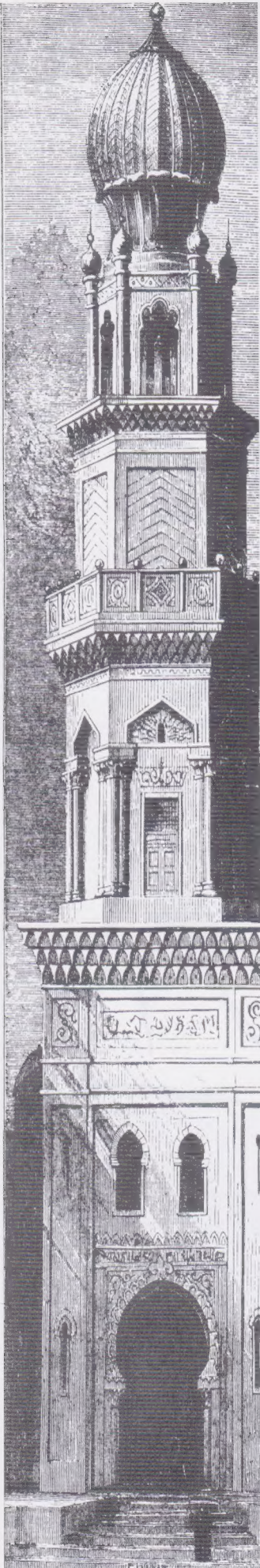
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In attempting to understand the issues surrounding the Iraq war, the Retort Collective employ a version of Guy Debord's theory of spectacle. In criticizing the problems with Retort's depiction of capital, we investigate whether these flaws mirror problems within Debord's own account. We thus use Retort's book as the starting point for an enquiry into the reasons why Debord's theory has proved so amenable to recuperation. This, we claim, derives from his flawed understanding of alienation, which arises from an overwhelming concern with commodity circulation and a consequently abstract conception of capitalist production. Through a critique of the theory of spectacle, we arrive at the notions of time, history and subjectivity that underlie it. Although the theory of spectacle may have little contemporary relevance, the notion of praxis that it rests upon remains pertinent and interesting.

Direct action: A bloke's eye view

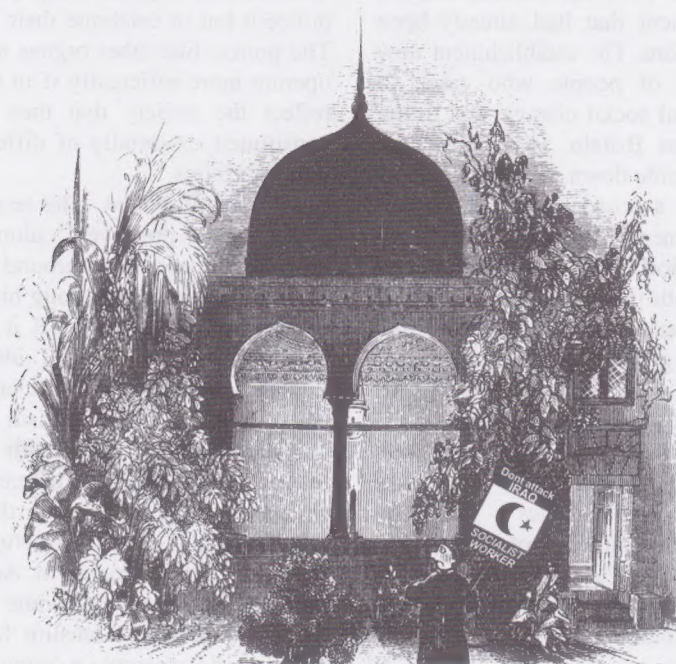
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Peter Styles's new novel *Birds, booze and bulldozers* presents an untold story of aspects of the direct action movement of the 1990s. As well as the right-on hippies who sometimes personified the movement, for others the occupations, site invasions, crane sittings and squats were times for partying, drinking and 'sharking'. The book covers many of the key movements and events of the period. The main character is a self-confessed 'ordinary bloke' who finds himself becoming an 'activist', an experience which enriches his life but at the same time creates emotional turmoil for him.



Croissants and roses

New Labour, communalism, and the rise of muslim Britain



Introduction

In 1997 New Labour came to power with the promise of sweeping away the last vestiges of the old British establishment, with all the class ridden and racist attitudes it had entailed, and create a new diverse, meritocratic and multicultural Britain. Exemplifying the emergence of this new multicultural Britain, the very same year saw, with the active encouragement of New Labour politicians, the formation the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), which claimed to represent the two million strong 'British muslim community'. However, five years later the honeymoon between New Labour and the 'British muslim community' seemed to be over. As ten of thousands of muslims mobilized to join the national anti-war demonstrations in the months before the invasion of Iraq, the 'British muslim community' appeared as a cohesive political force opposed to New Labour's foreign policy.

Buoyed by the huge up swell of popular opposition to the war, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), together with their leftist allies within the Stop the War Coalition, saw the opportunity of breaking into the big time of bourgeois politics on the back of this wave of anti-Tony Blair feeling. To this end Respect was set up in 2004 as a broad electoral alliance that sought to harness the popular opposition to the war and transform it into an opposition to New Labour as a whole.

Yet vital to the success of this project, particularly as the anti-war movement began to subside, was the need to bring the 'British muslim community' on board. So as not to put muslims off, the SWP insisted that Respect eschew left-wing 'shibboleths' such as women's and gay rights. They went to the mosques and echoed the arguments of the more radical

political Islamicists by claiming that Bush's 'Global War on Terror' was in fact a war on muslims – both abroad, with the attack on muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also at home with the succession of anti-terrorist legislation – that should be opposed by all muslims as 'muslims'. And like the more radical political Islamicists they denounced New Labour as being Islamophobic and racist.

Yet for all their efforts to pander to muslim sensitivities, Respect failed to win over the 'British muslim community', which remained wedded to New Labour. As we shall argue in this article, this attempt to bring the 'British muslim community' was doomed to fail since it was based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what the 'British muslim community' is and the nature of its connection to New Labour.

In Part 1 we shall consider how the politics and ideology of New Labour both emerged out of and transmuted the ideas and politics of the counter-culture and New Left of the 1960s and 1970s. In particular we shall show how anti-racism became transformed into the ideology and practice of communitarianism and multi-culturalism. In Part 2 we shall turn to consider how the 'British muslim community' emerged as a formal and abstract 'community' out of the various concrete Asian communities across Britain. In Part 3, we shall examine the relations between New Labour and both the 'British muslim community' and the various Asian communities that it seeks to represent. And we shall see why although the government's support for the 'global war on terror' placed a strain on these relationships, it did not break them.

Part 1: From New Left to New Labour

The ascendancy of New Labour in 1997 saw the culmination of a remaking of the establishment that had already been taking place for several years before. The establishment now consists of significant numbers of people who came to politics around 1968, when radical social change was in the air. This class of 1968 now runs Britain. In a sense, the political world has been turned upside down.

The class of '68 come from a broader cross section of society than their old establishment forebears. The social conditions of the post-war period – in particular social mobility and the expansion of both university education and the white collar service sector – have meant that some of the New Labour ruling class went to grammar schools and some even grew up on council estates – for example Jack Straw, David Blunkett, Alan Johnson, and Hazel Blears.

The emergence of this new, upwardly mobile establishment has been accompanied by a new consensus around the nature of 'society' and 'politics'. This new consensus is at least in part explicable in terms of the political and social experience of this class of '68. The consensus is over such issues as multiculturalism and makes sense of New Labour's relation to 'the muslim community'.

Community and 'community'

Bourgeois society is the negation of community, for in bourgeois society people do not relate to each other directly (whether in terms of authority, equality or whatever) but through commodities. Local 'communities' are simply people who by accident share the same living space. Yet long after the decline of traditional community relations in Britain, the concept of 'community' is important in the new establishment consensus, and is bandied about such that it seems to refer to just about any category of people, whether they actually know each other and relate to each other in some way or not.

Hence it is a commonplace now in bourgeois discourse to refer to the 'black community', the 'gay community' and so on. But this is not just talk. There is, as the right have bemoaned, an orthodoxy in the establishment around the moral and material status of these 'communities'. The rights and interests of the different 'communities' are given various forms of support through financial and legal relationships with the state. 'Equal opportunities', for example, has been expanded and consolidated to become a structural part of every organization and a powerful arm of government in its own right. And there is always a need for structures to ensure fairness since there are always (members of) 'groups' who might be discriminated against. While 'positive discrimination' is still not explicitly sanctioned, the police, for example, actively welcome applications from gay, female, vertically challenged, differently abled, 'ethnic' and other supposed representatives of 'minority' groups.

The rights of different 'communities' and categories of people are so taken for granted they are barely commented on nowadays, except by the more unreconstructed and nostalgic mouthpieces of the rabid right. Yet what we are referring to here is a massive cultural change that has taken place, from a relatively narrow national culture of conformity to one where 'diversity' is seen as a virtue by the establishment. Forty years ago, for example, who would have believed that Sussex Police would encourage their officers to attend the

ostentatious Brighton Gay Pride parade – not in order to police it but to celebrate their identity as gay police officers! The police, like other organs of the state, recognize that they operate more efficiently if in their demographic profile they reflect the society that they operate on – i.e., a society constituted essentially of different given 'communities' and interest groups.

Multiculturalism – the recognition of the essential worth and nature of pre-given 'cultural difference' – is a key plank of the consensus around the virtue of diversity. Multiculturalism has a long history. But, under New Labour, for the first time in the UK it has become embodied in state policy and practice. The idea has been central to New Labour's contribution to the creation of a politicized 'muslim community'. Multiculturalism not only assumes that there are different given cultures (with given or essential natures and interests) embodied in different communities, in practice it operates on the assumption that such 'communities' have a relatively solid internal structure, with recognized leaders etc. who the state can deal with. As we shall see, this isn't always the case. Yet, more than some other ethnic minority groups in the UK, traditional muslim families and their wider social networks do resemble a 'community' with a structure. There is no equivalent New Labour relation with 'the black community' (or, at least, it is not at all the same) as there is with the 'muslim community' and its political organs.

As indicated, these new establishment principles and policies – of society as constituted of different 'communities' and of multiculturalism – in part can be traced back to the experiences of the class of '68. In part at least, therefore, the New Labour establishment is a descendent of the New Left.

Critics of this 'continuity' thesis might rightly point out that there is a glaring and obvious discontinuity between the two – that while the New Left was anti-American (not least over the Vietnam war) New Labour is notoriously 'shoulder to shoulder' with the United States, and severe on those within the Party who have been critical of American policy, who are branded unrealistic, naïve, immature etc. Yet alongside such a break from the past, there are also clear and obvious continuities. For New Labour, every minor policy initiative and change within existing strategy and direction is described as 'radical', echoing the language and aspirations of those involved in the events of '68. What is interesting is the way that the co-existence of these two sorts of tendency within the new establishment has led to a crisis for New Labour. The relativism inherent in the new establishment values of multiculturalism and diversity, inherited from the radical days of 1968, conflicts with the new establishment's equally strong commitment to universalism – in the form of its war in Iraq, which was justified on the basis of democracy. As we shall see, one manifestation of this crisis is that, with the war, multiculturalism has lately come under attack from liberals as well as the right, due to the threat of 'home grown terrorism' (i.e. some members of ethnic minorities violently opposed to the 'British way of life').

To understand how the radical and revolutionary impulses of 1968 could be the basis of establishment policies and practices today that consolidate and build upon the counter-revolutionary right-wing offensive of the 1980s, we need to step back and look more closely at the different

meanings that could be found in the events of this earlier time. The explosion of events was on the one hand a re-emergence of visceral class struggle, in terms of attacks on the cops, state, businesses, employers, war and numerous government institutions. But the form and participants of the struggles also opened the way for seeing 1968 as a historical turning point for the class struggle as such. Was the proletariat expressing itself differently but the same in essence? Or did 1968 in fact mark the end of 'class politics' – the struggles of different groups of people, often outside the traditional forms and structures of the labour movement, signifying that society was now fundamentally structured according to quite different social strata and entities? To understand how and why New Labour has followed one strand of the New Left in taking the latter position, we must understand the nature and origins of the New Left itself.

Origins and nature of the New Left

The roots of the New Left go back before 1968, and are based on disillusion within the Old Left. First, the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 represented a massive blow to the idea of 'actually existing socialism' in the East. How could Stalinist Eastern Europe be 'progressive' if it sent tanks sent in to crush workers' councils? To these former supporters of the Soviet Union were added those who were increasingly critical of its oppressive practices at home.

Beyond the Soviet Union, the other bulwark of the old left was the gradual progress of social democracy¹ in Western Europe. In the UK, after the second world war, the post-war settlement² heightened expectations of what was possible through parliamentary means. The Labour government was elected, and there were immediate plans to nationalize aspects of the economy and basic infrastructure. The National Health Service was established; there was an extensive programme of social (council) housing, and the welfare state was developed to support those who couldn't work. Yet all these high hopes were soon dashed with the defeat of the Labour Party in the 1951 general election. Thirteen years of Conservative rule followed. While the relative consensus between the parties served to consolidate most of the social democratic gains, there was no further progress. The left were

on the outside again (most notably in this period in the form of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament). The subsequent re-election of the Labour Party in 1964, promised much but delivered less than its predecessor. Tony Crosland, by no means a left winger of any description, made plans to nationalize some of the leading companies in the country! But in fact, rather than further progressive change through social democracy, the Labour government made a number of compromises – most notably perhaps their adoption of Polaris nuclear missiles.

After these disappointments, then, the period around 1968 was a massive inspiration. The prospect of real, radical social change was discernable in the various events around the world: the Chinese cultural revolution (1966), the near revolution in France, May 1968, the anti-war and civil rights riots and protests in the USA, and the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia were just the most well known examples. While there were industrial actions by workers as workers, the subjects of many of the strikes, occupations, street confrontations, and campaigns were not workers qua workers but organized students and others not of the old left at all, and weren't constrained by the traditions of the workers' movement. In fact, the involvement of many young people fresh and new to politics led some to interpret the events as a 'clash of generations'. If the New Left was the product negatively of the failures of social democracy and Stalinism, positively it was the political expression of this resurgence and reinvention of the mass impulse towards social change by a new generation of activists.

But if the tumultuous events of 1968, particularly those in Paris, showed that the most radical social change was a real possibility, the nature of this social change, the identity of those who would carry it out, and – importantly – the reasons why it failed were subject to a variety of interpretations. The New Left was not an homogenous or unified movement or perspective coming out of 1968, but is rather a plethora of currents, movements, and trends across the left and libertarian spectrum that arose from that time.

On the one hand, the New Left expresses the resurgence of class struggle and hence of tendencies which emphasized class analysis in various forms. The Chinese cultural revolution had already raised the profile of Maoism as an alternative socialism to Stalinism; and a number of non-Stalinist Marxist groups were involved in the events of 1968. There was at the time and subsequently a re-engagement with the ideas of Marx. Older revolutionary traditions that had until then been eclipsed by the duopoly of Stalinism and social democratic reformism were re-energized. Versions of Trotskyism flourished, for example. The Situationist International and those who followed them famously drew upon the ideas of council communists, such as Pannekoek; left communism and the ideas of Bordiga too had a revival (e.g. the International Communist Current).³

On the other hand, some New Left tendencies stressed the 'cultural' aspects of the events of 1968. In these accounts, struggle and hence revolution was no longer about economic scarcity and the old class-based politics but about oppression and hence liberation of various forms. Social change was linked to lifestyle and personal politics; and the agents of

¹ Social democracy can be defined as the representation of the working class as labour within capital and the bourgeois state, politically through social democratic parties (such as the old Labour Party), and economically through trades unions.

² In the UK, following the second world war pressure from the working class, and ruling class fear of revolution, led to the provision of comprehensive and inclusive welfare, corporatism (tripartite organizations and trade union rights), full employment and wealth redistribution through taxation. In effect, the working class exchanged the desire for revolution or further radical social changes in return for the inclusion of its demands within the state and capital. The 'gains' for the working class – for example, free health care, universal welfare system, social housing – necessarily involved its demobilization. Working class communities were broken up as new housing estates were built. The old networks of mutual aid and solidarity were replaced by the bureaucratic administration of welfare etc. At the same time, rising real wages necessarily involved an intensification and monotonization of work. This *post-war settlement* could only be sustained through the economic conditions of the post-war boom; yet it also tended to undermine these very economic conditions. See 'Unemployed recalcitrance and welfare restructuring in the UK today' in *Stop the Clock!* or on our website.

³ Readers will know of the ICC through their news-sheet *World Revolution* which is sold from the fringes of leftist and anarchist meetings, demos etc.

change were the 'new social movements' of such groups as women, blacks, gays, youth, squatters, anti-nuclear and ecological campaigners and so on. These cross-class cleavages became the basis for the 'identity politics' of the 1970s and 80s, fragmenting the New Left.

As we shortly see in more detail, ten years later there was an economic downturn and a right-wing backlash. In this context, the hopes of many of the New Left still bore the stamp of that time of radical change but became more modest in practice. Many of the same people who condemned the unprincipled compromises of social democracy, and argued that change could only come from outside the establishment, now looked to the inside for change. With the reality of revolution apparently fading into the distance, the only possibility of any kind of social transformation now seemed to be through much more gradualist reformist means for the foreseeable future. Many of the 1968-inspired New Left therefore now entered the Labour Party for 'the long march through the institutions' to a better society.

This turn from outside to inside the institutions was made possible by changes that had been taking place in British society since the last war, which had affected many of the class of '68. Before describing these changes, however, we need to remain with the events of 1968. As we shall see, the celebration of group diversity and difference was not only inspired by the autonomous struggles of different groups but was also prompted by a defence against a last-ditch attack by the Conservative old right in its efforts to hold on to a notion of supposed homogenous Britishness.



Imperialism and racism of the old British Right

On April 20th 1968, barely two weeks before the revolutionary events were to break out on the other side of the English Channel, Enoch Powell, the then shadow secretary of state for defence, delivered his notorious 'rivers of blood' speech⁴ to the Birmingham Conservative Association. Powell

⁴ Powell never explicitly referred to 'rivers of blood' in his speech. The title derives from his reference to Virgil's epic poem, *Aeneid*: 'As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see "the River Tiber foaming with much blood."'

argued that the numbers of immigrants from both the West Indies and the Indian subcontinent over the previous two decades had become far too large to be assimilated into the British way of life. As a result, as they settled in Britain and had children, the immigrant populations were establishing their own separate and alien cultures in many of Britain's major towns and cities that would inevitably come into conflict with the culture of the indigenous White population. On the basis of lurid anecdotes drawn from his white constituents, Powell warned, that unless concerted measures were immediately taken to repatriate immigrants, serious racial conflict would sooner or later become inescapable.

Enoch Powell, like most of the Conservative Party, had previously welcomed the large scale immigrations from both the West Indies and the Indian subcontinent as a means of dealing with the acute labour shortages, and the consequent strengthening of the trade union bargaining position, that had arisen during the long post-war economic upswing. Indeed, as Minister of Health between 1960-63, Powell had actively promoted the policy of recruiting workers to fill unskilled jobs in the NHS from the West Indies. However, over the winter of 1968, culminating with his 'rivers of blood' speech, it became clear that Enoch Powell had made a decisive about-turn with regard to the issue of immigration.

Powell, had not been the first Tory politician to break ranks with the then existing official Conservative policy on immigration in order to play the 'race card'. In 1964, much to the embarrassment of Conservative Central Office, the Conservative Party in Smethwick constituency in Birmingham, had waged a vehemently racist anti-immigration local election campaign to win control of the local council – one of the few electoral gains made at a time when there was a nation wide swing to the Labour Party.⁵

However, Powell's speech was particularly significant because he was a prominent front bench politician for the Conservative Party, and one of the party's few recognized intellectuals. But what is more, with his old fogey image and the frequent allusions to the literature of ancient Greece and Rome which littered his speeches, Enoch Powell seemed to many to epitomize the persistence of the old British establishment and the Victorian order and values that served to uphold it. Indeed, for liberals, modernizers and progressives, Powell was a reminder, amidst the hopes raised by the election of a Labour government after years of Conservative rule, that Britain remained a 'class-ridden' society, in which social rank was strictly demarcated by accent, dress and mannerisms, formed through an elitist and class based educational system. Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech underlined the fact that the Victorian order, and the insular, reactionary and racist attitudes it engendered, was still very much alive.

The British establishment, and the Victorian order which upheld it, had emerged in the late nineteenth century as a result of the alliance, and gradual fusion, between the newly

⁵ It was alleged that the Smethwick Conservative Party had distributed stickers with the slogan 'If you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Labour.' The local Conservative Party of course denied having anything to do with these stickers. However, Conservative Central Office was so concerned about the overtly racist inclinations of the Smethwick Conservative Party that they sent down 'mindes' at the subsequent general election to supervise the running of the election campaign. See *The Rise of Enoch Powell*, Paul Foot, Commarket Press, 1969.

emergent industrial bourgeoisie and the declining ruling landed aristocracy. After the tumultuous social change and intense class conflicts of the early decades of the century, which had been brought about by industrial revolution and rapid urbanization, both the industrial bourgeoisie and the landed aristocracy had been united by the aim of consolidating the existing social order and their position within it, particularly in the face of an increasingly militant and organized working class.

During the early years of Queen Victoria's reign, the industrial bourgeoisie had been permitted to run the new industrial cities while the landed aristocracy continued to rule the countryside and govern national affairs. However, with the agricultural depression of the 1870s and 1880s and the consequent decline in land rents, the economic independence of the landed aristocracy was steadily undermined. The political and social position of the ruling establishment became increasingly dependent on the transfusion of wealth and economic power of the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie. Successful businessmen, who wished to consolidate their gains by obtaining influence in the corridors of power and by enhancing their social status, were increasingly able to gain admittance to the institutions and social networks that together constituted the ruling establishment. They were encouraged to buy country estates, to go hunting and grouse shooting; to invite the titled to lend prestige and authority by sitting on the boards of their companies; to marry their daughters into aristocratic families and to send their sons to public school to be educated in the classics alongside the sons of the upper class. In such ways sections of the bourgeoisie could be slowly assimilated into the establishment and what remained of the old landed aristocracy could secure their privileges and social position as part of the governing class.

This gradual assimilation of the bourgeoisie into the ruling established order necessarily entailed the maintenance, and indeed a reassertion of distinctions of social rank. Yet while Victorian Britain remained a sharply 'class' divided society it became increasingly ideologically united behind the supposed common allegiance to 'Queen, Country and Empire'.

The rapid growth of the British Empire in the final three decades of the nineteenth century had important economic advantages that served to underpin the emerging Victorian order. Firstly, the Empire had to be run. It provided expanding secure and well remunerated posts both in the army and the civil service for the sons of the landed aristocracy. For the capitalist, the Empire provided protected markets for the commodities they produced, privileged access to raw materials and cheap labour, and an outlet for banking and finance. At the same time easy profits that could be made from the Empire allowed British capitalists to make timely material concessions to the working class that served to mitigate class conflict at home.

However, just as important as these economic advantages in cementing together the sharply 'class' divided late Victorian society, particularly as far as the working class was concerned, was the inherently racist ideology of Empire. Britain was seen as taking up the torch of Western civilization that dated back to the ancient world of Greece and Rome. The British Empire, like that of Rome, brought the benefits of civilization to the world, but on a far greater scale. Yet while the spread of the British Empire could be justified in terms of

bringing the benefits of Western civilization to the 'primitive' peoples of Africa, Asia and elsewhere, this was insufficient to justify continued British rule. After all if these 'primitive' peoples were civilized by the British Empire why could they not then eventually rule themselves. The answer to this was racialism, that is that the non-white races were biologically inferior and were therefore inherently incapable of ruling themselves in a civilized manner. The British therefore, it was concluded, had a right, and indeed a duty, to rule. By the end of the century, like elsewhere in Europe, the racist theories of racialism and eugenics had become pervasive to the point of being common sense in Britain, with even socialist intellectuals accepting them.

The social and political changes following the first world war, particularly the continued growth of organized labour, combined with the decline of Britain's economic hegemony, which culminated in the dismemberment of the British Empire, undermined the basis of the old Victorian order. By the end of the second world war large sections of the old establishment had come to accept, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, that if the British working class was not 'to go Communist', and if British industry was to compete with that of Europe and the USA, then Britain had to be modernized. By the 1950s, all but the most diehard right-wing Tories came to accept, in the face of national liberation movements and pressure from the USA, that Britain's former colonies would sooner or later have to be granted independence. While in domestic affairs it was accepted that the social distinctions and class privileges of the old Victorian order had to be dismantled. The only issue was the pace of change.

One of the central planks upon which this post-war consensus was built was the *post-hoc* justification of the second world war as a war that had united Britain, with its long established democratic traditions, against Nazi and fascist totalitarianism. With the revelations of the Nazi holocaust, eugenics and racialist theories, which as we have mentioned were once so pervasive in both ruling class circles and amongst intellectuals, were now thoroughly discredited. Indeed, suggestion of racism was now to become a taboo in 'polite society'.

The myth that Britain had been united in a war against the Nazis and their fascist and racist ideology served the British left well in its efforts to build a national consensus around social democratic reforms. It could be argued that the great sacrifices made by the nation, particularly by the working class, had to be rewarded by a fairer more progressive Britain. However, it was a convenient myth for many on the right since it covered up the widespread anti-Semitism and pro-Nazi sympathies amongst the British ruling establishment during the 1930s – ranging from members of the Royal Family down to proprietors of national newspapers such as the *Daily Mail*.

For many on the left, in 'daring to speak out' in his 'rivers of blood' speech, Enoch Powell had betrayed the persistent covert racism of large parts of the British establishment. However, while this may have been the case, for Powell the old establishment, having already betrayed the Empire for its own short-term advantages, was now standing by while Britain's thousand-year-old culture and traditions were about to be overwhelmed and destroyed. Indeed, Powell had little but disdain for many of those who now made up the establishment who were prepared to sacrifice ancient traditions and principles for the sake of preserving their

privileges a little bit longer and who failed to live up to his romanticized view of the old Victorian order.

In making his 'rivers of blood' speech Enoch Powell was clearly aiming to make his appeal, not to the right wing of the establishment but directly to the 'lower orders. Indeed, The speech was full of anecdotes expressing the fears of the Tory working class and lower middle class that their exalted position in the world was under threat and that now that the Empire was gone the tables would be turned and 'the black man will have the whip hand'.⁶ Powell's speech certainly resonated amongst large sections of the working and lower middle classes. Not only was Enoch Powell inundated with messages of support but at the time his speech was widely credited with contributing to the Labour Party's subsequent unexpected defeat in the 1970 general election.

For the new left, Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech and its aftermath was a defining episode in terms of both the issue of racism and in its relation to the old left. Indeed, it was to play an important part in the subsequent development of the new left's ideas concerning multiculturalism. Following his speech Enoch Powell was widely denounced by nearly all mainstream politicians. Even the *Sunday Times* denounced Powell for 'racialism' and he was promptly dismissed from the shadow cabinet. Yet in response to the subsequent popularity of Enoch Powell's speech, as had happened previously when the issue of immigration raised its head, within months a new immigration law was passed aimed at curbing the right of entry for immigrants from the New Commonwealth – that is from those parts of the former British Empire whose populations were predominantly black or Asian.

The question that arose was why liberals and social democrats in government and parliament had so easily capitulated to the demands of Powell and his racist right wing populism. Was it because these well meaning liberals and social democrats were simply weak kneed? Or was it because they were implicitly racist themselves to some unacknowledged degree?

It is probably true that many of those at the time, who both rallied to his support or vehemently opposed him, saw Enoch Powell as defending the old-style racialism. However, Enoch Powell was careful to avoid arguing that 'coloureds' were biologically inferior and thus unable to be fully integrated into civilized British society. What prevented the integration of black and Asian immigrants into British society was their *alien culture*. Thus there was nothing to stop blacks and Asians from adopting the British way of life as individuals, but as groups asserting their own distinct culture they could not. As such the difference between Powell and the mainstream proponents of assimilation was simply a question of numbers. That is, how many blacks and Asian immigrants could Britain absorb.

Indeed, to the extent the liberal policy of assimilation assumed that it was appropriate for immigrants to adopt British culture, it was just as racist as Powell – it was part and parcel of the new style racism based not on biology but on culture. This rise to the notion of multiculturalism, with its insistence on the equality of cultures, we will see was to emerge over the following four decades as the new dominant consensus.

The aftermath of the 'rivers of blood' speech

The positive response to the 'rivers of blood' speech served to highlight the endemic racism and social conservatism of significant sections of the British working class. For many in the new left this served to strengthen their rejection of the old left's faith in the working class as the primary agent for social change and underlined the need to look for new agents of social change, which were being constituted by the new social movements, such as the young, women, blacks or the oppressed people of the Third World.

For others in the new left this endemic racism and social conservatism in the working class was the result of the labourist ideology embedded in the institutions and leadership of the traditional British labour movement. Often invoking Lenin, it was argued that from its very inception in the mid-nineteenth century the reformist British labour movement had been dominated by a 'labour aristocracy' whose relative privileged position was dependent on the super-exploitation of oppressed peoples of the British Empire. As a result there had been a long history of complicity on the part of the British Labour movement with imperialism, and a failure to combat the racism it engendered within the working class. From this it was concluded that the British labour movement had to be radically reshaped or a new more revolutionary one built out of the militancy of the rank and file.

Either way, for both the 'new new left' and the 'old new left', the widespread conclusion was a rejection of the Labour Party and its reformist politics for much of the 1970s. But by the end of the 1970s the political climate had begun to change as the dark clouds of reaction began to draw in.

The 1970s were a period of economic uncertainty and increasing political polarization. Amidst soaring inflation and rising unemployment, the revolutionary hopes raised by '68, and sustained through to the miners' victory in 1974, had by the late 1970s been overtaken by fears of a right-wing backlash and a 'return to the '30s'. Deepening economic crisis, and with it the hastening of Britain's long term economic decline, coupled with cuts in public spending on housing and public services were all serving to accentuate racist sentiments, particularly amongst the economically insecure lower middle classes and less well off sections of the working class. Blacks and Asians were easy scapegoats and faced not only persistent discrimination by employers and police harassment but also frequent racist abuse and mounting physical attacks by racist gangs.

On the back of this rise in overt racism, fuelled by lurid tales in the tabloids, came the rise of the National Front. The National Front had been founded in 1967 as a means to unite the various fragments of the old British Union of Fascists and other tiny fringe far right-wing groups. At that time it had been easily dismissed as merely a collection of harmless nutters. Ten years later the National Front was threatening to become a serious political force. It was beginning to make significant gains in local elections and had become bold enough to attempt to seize control over the streets by holding sizeable marches through immigrant areas. Fears grew on the left that sooner or later the British ruling class would abandon its post-war anti-fascist ideology and turn to the National Front to find a solution to the deepening economic and political crisis facing Britain.

Undoubtedly the National Front was able to tap into the racist currents that were still widespread within British

⁶ This was a fear of one of Powell's constituents quoted in the speech.

society, and which had been brought to the surface by the deepening economic and political crisis of the 1970s. However, at the same time, longer term ideological and cultural changes, which had been developing since at least the end of the second world war, meant that there were far stronger anti-racist currents that could be mobilized.

Victory in two world wars had certainly served to bolster British nationalism; but in both these wars Britain was seen as championing democracy, firstly against the Kaiser's authoritarian militarism and then against Hitler's Nazi Germany. Consequently, even for people with right-wing opinions, any affinity with Nazism, and its anti-Semitic white supremacism, was widely seen as being unpatriotic - quite unBritish in fact. This was always a formidable barrier for the acceptance of the National Front as the party of British nationalism.

Furthermore, although the world wars had served to inflate a sense of British superiority this was soon to be punctured. In 1956 Britain was humiliated at the hands of the Americans when, in the face of US opposition, the British and French governments were obliged to call off their combined invasion of Egypt to re-capture the Suez Canal that had been nationalized by Nasser.⁷

The humiliations of 1956, combined with the final demise of the British Empire by the early 1960s, brought a general recognition of Britain's diminished position in the world. Of course, it was precisely this realization that Great Britain was no longer as great as it once was - along with the belief that this was due to the failings of the British ruling elites - that had served to fuel the popular support for both Enoch Powell and subsequently the National Front. However, for many, particularly amongst the younger generations of the time, the notion of 'making Britain great again' was simply a hopeless nostalgia for a by-gone age. After all, what had been so great about Britain apart from its ability to conquer half the world?

This acceptance of Britain's decline in the world, and with it a rejection of British chauvinism, brought with it an increasing acceptance of other cultures. Indeed, for the generation born after the second world war, embracing other cultures offered a means of escape from the conservative and insular confines of British culture, whose drabness had been accentuated by the post-war austerity of the 1950s. As a consequence, central to the British counter-culture of the 1960s was a trans-culturalism, which sought a cross fertilization of cultures - from India to that of black America.

As a result, when the children of the wave of immigrants from the West Indies of the 1950s and '60s came of age and began to assert their culture this was not seen by most young whites as a threat, as Enoch Powell had foretold, but as an exciting opportunity. Ska, reggae and ganga became a common point of reference to both young whites and blacks. Hence when social tensions erupted into full-scale riots in the late 1970s and early 1980s these were not race riots, as

Powell had predicted, but anti-racist and anti-fascist riots. In the riots that followed the Notting Hill Carnivals in the mid-1970s, in the Lewisham and Southall riots of 1977 and in the country wide riots of July 1981, young blacks, whites and indeed Asians joined together to fight the racist actions of the police and to stop the National Front.

In 1977 the Anti-Nazi League (ANL) was formed as a broad front to oppose the political advance of the National Front. In drawing in everyone from Anarchists and Trotskyists through Labour Party members to liberals and even a few Tories, the ANL served to bring together the New and old left in a common fight against racism and fascism. With the slogan the 'National Front is a Nazi Front' and by tapping into the anti-racism of the counter-culture with its 'rock against racism' campaign the ANL succeeded in halting the electoral advance of the National Front. This, combined with the physical defeat of the National Front's attempt to dominate the streets, meant that by the end of the 1970s the threat posed by the National Front was receding.

However, although the advance of the National Front was halted, Thatcher won the 1979 election by landslide - an electoral success in part due to her willingness to 'play the race card'. Echoing Powell's 'river of blood' speech, Thatcher had expressed the fear of Britain being 'swamped' by immigrants.⁸ Indeed, by echoing Powell, Thatcher was able to take the wind out of the National Front's sails and make the Conservative Party the representative of those who feared further immigration.

In the face of the new Thatcher government many on the new left now flocked into the Labour Party. The new left now began its long march through the institutions ending up as new labour as we shall now relate.

The rise of the new middle classes

The class of '68 were born into a world where the old Victorian social order that Powell was seen to represent was already dying. As we have argued, while some of the ideas of the new establishment find their origins in the events of 1968, the class of 1968 were only able to become the new establishment - to move from the outside of New Left social movements to roles within the institutions - due to by changes that had been taking place in British society since the last war. In particular, changes in social mobility altered the class position of many. Their changed class positions are themselves part of the explanation of the new establishment consensus over the 'muslim community'. We now turn to briefly outline these changes in social mobility that allowed a generation with quite different social background than their

⁷ But perhaps more important for many was England's humiliation at the hands of the Hungarians in football, firstly with their unprecedented 6-3 defeat at Wembley in 1953 and then the 7-1 hammering in Budapest the following year. England's prestige was partly recovered by winning the World Cup in 1966, but this was not to last long. In 1970 England was knocked out in the quarter finals and for the rest of the decade the England team found it very difficult even to qualify for the tournament.

⁸ Interview with the journalist, Gordon Burns, broadcast on Granada TV, January 30 1978. Thatcher was responding to a question over immigrant numbers by arguing that 'if we went on as we are then by the end of the century there would be four million people of the new Commonwealth or Pakistan here. Now, that is an awful lot and I think it means that people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture and, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in.' www.margarethatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=103485

forebears to emerge as the UK's most influential leading politicians, civil servants, intellectuals and entrepreneurs.⁹

The post war settlement is the key to understanding the enhanced social mobility that took place after the war. One of the features of the settlement was a huge university building programme, which made it possible for many working class and lower middle families to send their offspring to university or polytechnic for the first time. Further and higher education were no longer in effect the privilege of the toff class. This massive expansion of higher education was matched by growth in the public sector more generally – the lower end of the civil service, local authority services, and the national health service all expanded. Thus those graduating from university now found new management, white collar and other higher-status places waiting for them.



The growth of higher education made bourgeois society in the UK much more meritocratic and rational, as more people were appointed on the basis of formal qualifications regardless of family background. The growth of middle class jobs in effect meant that a whole swathe of working class people became middle class in one generation. The first people to make this transition were the post war baby-boomers, those people born in the 1940s and 50s. These same people who would become young adults around 1968. They therefore made up a large part of the New Left that grew from the events of this time. When the prospect of revolution receded, it was these same people who then pursued more modest objectives. They often did this through the ranks of the Labour Party, or through reformist and 'single issue' campaigns and pressure groups, or through liberal institutions, or local government.

By the 1980s, many of the new middle class New Left class of '68 found that their earlier modest strategy choices now took the form of appealing career ladders. New opportunities opened up to them in the developing creative industries (media, advertising), in higher education, and in the civil service.

In this context, their working class origins became increasingly forgotten, and the class analysis that had once been as relevant the exciting new perspectives of the late 1960s now seemed to have little applicability to their

lifestyles, aspirations, identities and social circles, and their politics. After all, it seemed to them, the working class were often the problem itself not part of the solution at all. It was the old-fashioned, conformist working class where sexist attitudes, homophobic opinions and racist expressions were found to still exist unabashed.

Indeed, these kind of points were not peripheral but central to the new political consensus that was emerging in the new middle class and their allies in the old establishment. For example, political correctness – the imperative to use language that does not offend different groups – could be seen as the natural extension of one of the key innovations of the New Left (i.e. the recognition of the autonomous potential of various different groups). Thus social change could indeed be achieved, and the remaining barriers to equality and freedom for all the different groups of people making up society, could be overcome. All that was needed then was for these new middle classes to be in positions of power, on the inside.

Hence for example the unarguable attack on the dominance of 'white middle-aged (middle class) men', with their assumed oppressive attitudes, was first made in the Labour Party – through the argument for black and female candidate short-lists. This attack on the monoculturalism of the old elite was then pressed through allied groups such as the National Council of Civil Liberties (now Liberty) and other liberal charities, think-tanks, intellectuals and lobbying groups. The attack was understood as a rallying call for the positive contribution that minority groups could make, for the essential value and worth of these groups, who had been excluded for no other reason than the prejudice of tradition. It was a call for a more rational and fair society.

The strategy flourished in the Labour Party's local government strongholds. The clearest and most developed expression was in the Greater London Council (GLC). 'Red' Ken Livingstone oversaw the appointment of numerous highly paid professionals to look after special interest groups such as blacks, gays, women, gay women, black gays etc. etc. But the creation of jobs for the representatives of these 'communities' and interest groups was significant in forming careers that took 'radical' people from the outside and put them on the path to the establishment. Any number of community activists, who had originally organized independently, got vast amounts of funding from the GLC, which eventually took them from the outside to a career path on the inside. The careerization of radical feminists is an obvious case in point.

Throughout the 1980s, the Conservatives were still in power nationally, so the New Left attacked the old establishment from the outside. The GLC and other labour strongholds saw themselves and were seen as anti-establishment. This was true, in the sense that the campaigning groups and individuals that Labour councils such as the GLC supported were critical of the status quo: they campaigned around such issues as police racism, for example.

Yet, the old establishment was also under attack from the inside. Prime minister Margaret Thatcher was herself not from the upper middle class but had come to power through forging an alliance between the old establishment and the new, an alliance which in fact served to undermine the old establishment. Thatcher and her ministers promoted old-fashioned establishment values such as the traditional family and gender roles, nationalism, and racism. But she also

⁹ Media, advertising and finance have been some of the areas where this new breed are to be found, but such ex-hippie figures as Richard Branson (Virgin Records then Virgin everything else) and Anita Roddick (the Bodyshop founder) are also good examples.

sacked a number of the old school tie brigade and promoted into her cabinet new middle class and former working class grammar school boys like Norman Tebbit, Kenneth Clarke, and John Major.

In effect, with the support of some of the old establishment in an alliance of old and new right, Thatcher pursued neo-liberal policies on the freedom of money capital.¹⁰ Sweeping away all barriers to the movement of money-capital meant destroying some of the traditions, customs and rules of the old establishment. The most explosive expression of this was the opening up of the City and British banks to just anyone with money (including foreigners) – the ‘Big bang’ or ‘Wimbledonization’ of the City. This liberalization went hand in hand with the decimation of manufacturing (with its entrenched management and well as labour practices) and the retirement of old school tie mandarins such as ‘Sir Humphrey’,¹¹ in the changing civil service. The changes Thatcher’s government introduced therefore served to complete the formalization and rationalization of the bourgeois revolution. Merit and profit were finally dislodging the stupifying influence of tradition in almost every area of society.

The continued pursuit of nationalism, however, with its ethnocentrism and irrational loyalty to the traditions of the nation state came into conflict with this free market ‘revolution’, most obviously in the Conservatives’ contradictions over Europe. As we shall see, New Labour’s pursuit of the war in Iraq and its ‘modernization’ of society has embodied a similar contradiction.

The ideological and political transition to New Labour

Post-modernism:

The bridge from New left to New Labour

As early as the 1950s American sociologists had begun to argue that with the relative decline of American manufacturing industry, and the consequent growing economic importance of ‘the service sector’, America was becoming a ‘post-industrial society’. In the early 1970s, drawing on such ideas, historians of art and, in particular architecture, began to argue that this economic and sociological transition was being reflected in a cultural shift away from the ‘modernism’ associated with the industrialization of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, to ‘post-modernist’ forms of art and architecture.¹² By the late 1970s, these ideas were broadened, and given much greater philosophical depth, with their merger with the various strands of post-structuralist philosophy emanating from France. The various and often mutually inconsistent theories and notions that resulted, which came to be known under the rather broad rubric of post-modernism, swept across

the faculties of the social sciences and the humanities of Britain’s universities in the 1980s.¹³

The ideas of post-modernism, and more particularly post-structuralism, had a strong appeal to the rising generation of academics who had benefited from the large-scale expansion of higher education in the 1960s and that, as a consequence, had been drawn from a much broader section of society than any previous generation of academics.

First of all, for those who had been radicalized by their involvement in the new left and the counter-culture, but who had now given up all hope that there would be any immediate revolutionary change in society – and had consequently ‘sold out’ and embarked on an academic career – post-modernism offered a means to preserve their sense of being radical and critical. Indeed, post-modernism often drew on many of the political and cultural themes of the counter-culture and the new left and, what is more seemed to give them a more radical theoretical and philosophical basis. As a result, post-modernism could appear to many young academics at the time as being, at least theoretically, far more radical than the rather ‘outdated’ nineteenth century ideas of revolutionary Anarchism or Marxism that they had once adopted in their student days.¹⁴

Secondly, post-modernism provided this new generation of academics with rather devastating weapons with which to storm to the old elitist, white and male-dominated bastions that still remained within academia, as well as the means to carve out a niche for themselves in the newly expanded world of higher education. Post-modernism provided the distinctive subject matter for a whole new range of academic departments; such as cultural studies, media studies, women’s studies, black studies and so forth. At the same time, in the older existing academic disciplines, such as English literature and sociology, post-modernism provided a radical new alternative that could undercut the established orthodox theories.

One of the first university departments that post-modernism colonized was that of English literature. English literature, particularly at Oxford and Cambridge, was traditionally regarded as something of a backwater. A subject deemed suitable for the small number of women students that in less enlightened times had managed to reach the level of a university education. For a time in the 1980s, English departments, particularly the one at Cambridge, became the cutting edge of the Post-Modernist offensive. The notion, dating back to Matthew Arnold in the late nineteenth century, that the role of the universities was to defend the elitist ‘high culture’, defined by a canon of great literary works, from the barbarism and philistinism of mass popular culture was ruthlessly attacked. The class walls between high, middle and low brow culture had to be torn down, while the voices of those that had been long suppressed and excluded from the white, male-dominated great canon, had to be heard and recognized. Thus the artwork of the *Beano* and the lyrics of

¹⁰ These policies would in the nineteenth century have been referred to as middle class liberalism.

¹¹ Sir Humphrey is the name of the powerful career Whitehall civil servant in the television comedy ‘Yes, minister’.

¹² Of course the notion of ‘modernism’ is quite vague and nebulous. Indeed, in literature, what are usually considered as modernist writers were more often than not reacting against modern industrialism. See Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, Verso, London, 1998.

¹³ For critiques of post-modernism, see Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, Verso, London, 1998; Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989 and Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Blackwell Press, Oxford, 1996.

¹⁴ For arguments showing how post-modernism was an ideology of defeat, see Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989 and Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Blackwell Press, Oxford, 1996.

Bob Dylan could be considered just as worthy of academic study as the paintings of the 'Grand Masters' or the poems of Keats. The writings in English of women, as well as the Black and Asian writers of the former colonies had to be considered as just as much a part of English Literature as the predominantly white male writers recognized by the great literary canon.

However, the Post-Modernist offensive did not remain confined to undermining what was after all the rather conservative and Victorian notion that the essence of Western civilization, and indeed its superiority, was embodied in its high art and literature. In much of the social sciences the established schools of thought, whether liberal, conservative, or even Marxist, all sought to emulate to a greater or lesser extent the empirical methods and reasoning of the natural sciences. The radical challenge of post-modernism was to attack empiricism foundationalism of the social sciences by undercutting its very roots. The Post-Modernists set about attacking the underlying notion that the history, and, with this, the superiority of Western civilization and culture was defined by the progress of reason, which, with the scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth century Enlightenment, had thrown off the shackles of superstition and religious dogma so as to find its highest expression in science and technology.

For the shock troops of post-modernism this notion of the progress of reason and science was merely the conceit of a 'euro-centric meta-narrative'. It was not simply that there was no such thing as empirical facts independent of the theory that was to be verified or falsified by them; but that there was no such thing as an objective truth that could be known by reason. Both the solidity of the knowable 'object' and the 'rational subject', the twin pillars of the epistemology of science and indeed the Enlightenment, were 'deconstructed' and 'de-centred'. There was, it was declared, nothing knowable beyond 'discourse' or the 'text' - there was only the free interplay of signifieds and signifiers, which ultimately only referred to themselves and their differences. Science, it was asserted, was no more than a narrative, which, as such, had no more claim to a superior or privileged status than any other narrative, including those it had claimed to have overcome, such as magic or religious dogma of other, allegedly less advanced, cultures.

History and progress, and hence the very claim that Western civilization was in some way more advanced than other societies and cultures, was merely a fiction. As such, history as known by Hegel, Marx and other Enlightenment figures, was merely a 'grand narrative'. There was no such thing as history, only a multitude of stories; and hence there was no such thing as historical progress (hence it was meaningless to talk of something being progressive or reactionary).

By the end of the 1980s post-modernism had reached its apogee. The university departments that were most susceptible to post-modernism had by then already become colonized. The notion of 'post-modernism', and a vague understanding of the ideas associated with it, had now become a part of the common knowledge of the 'educated classes' beyond the walls of the lecture theatre. 'Post-modernism' continued to have an appeal to the social milieus associated with Britain's rapidly expanding cultural, media and advertising industries. However, for those of the post-68 generation who were on the verge of taking senior positions

in the management of British capital and state, the intellectual nihilism of post-modernism, while retaining a certain fascination for some, was of little practical use in running the everyday reality of capitalism.

With the self-indulgent obscurantism of much of its writings, its glaring logical incoherence, together with the startling ignorance of the natural sciences it claimed to critique and the injudicious remarks concerning world affairs of its more vulgar proponents - most notoriously Baudrillard's insistence that the Gulf War did not happen - only served to open post-modernism up to ridicule and hasten its decline. By the early 1990s post-modernism was becoming distinctly passé. With the collapse of the USSR, and the consequent neo-liberal triumphalism, it became fashionable once again for intellectuals to speak of 'progress', 'modernization' and the 'end of history'.

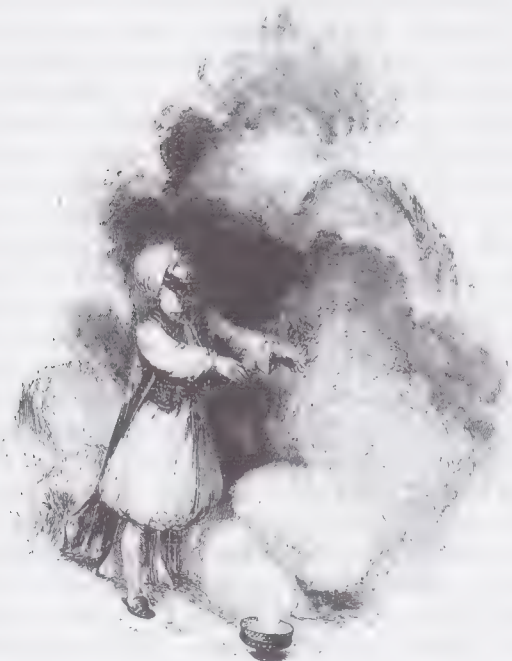
Nevertheless, despite its decline, post-modernism was to have two distinct, if at times contradictory, legacies for the new ruling ideology that was to find its clearest political expression in the then emerging New Labour 'project'. First and foremost, post-modernism was to bequeath a strong predisposition towards cultural relativism within this emerging ruling ideology. As such post-modernism was to provide the intellectual basis for the relativist multicultural consensus, which insisted on the difference and incommensurability between cultures, that, as we shall see, was to influence much of New Labour's thinking on social policy.

Secondly, post-modernism, for all its supposed ultra-radicalism, paved the way for the acceptance of neo-liberalism and market fundamentalism, which was to be the defining element of the New Labour project. The pseudo-radicalism of post-modernism was always readily apparent as soon as its principal proponents were lured out of the comfort of their academic preoccupations to address some concrete political issue, when, almost invariably, they would reveal themselves to be either middle of the road liberals or conservatives. But this was not due to the proponents of post-modernism falling short of their theory, but was inherent in post-modernist theory itself. In denying the 'modernist' and enlightenment appeals to reason, history and reality, post-modernism denied any actual possibility for systematic total social transformation. Post-Modernists either had to be content, like Foucault, with the fragmentary reformism of everyday life; or else, like Baudrillard, to an inherently conservative acceptance of the inevitability and inescapability of what simply *is*. Such resigned acceptance easily slipped into a celebration of the freedom and individualistic hedonism of the market. After all, it could be argued for example that by playing with the ever shifting semiotics of differing commodities, the free market allows the consumer to constantly redefine their image, and hence roles and identities through what they buy. As a consequence, the well paid post-modernist academic could easily conclude that shopping could be a subversive activity.

At least as far as the educated and upwardly mobile 'class of 68' were concerned, it could be said that post-modernism did more to bring about the acceptance of neo-liberalism than any of its chief advocates, such as Hayek or Friedman, could have dreamed of doing through their explicit polemics and propaganda. But, of course, there was a certain irony in all this in that post-modernism ended up contributing to the resurrection of the most pervasive of all 'meta-

narratives' of the nineteenth century – that of classical economic liberalism: in which history is told as the progressive freeing of the market and the individual from state interference. Indeed, as we shall see in Part III, the latent contradiction between the post-modernist legacy of relativism underpinning New Labour's multi-culturalism, and the universalism of its acceptance of neo-liberalism, was to come to the fore following the attack on the Twin Towers and the subsequent invasion of Iraq.

But the question we must now ask is how did post-modernism, which after all was merely an intellectual fashion which could have well remained entrenched within the realms of academia, help give rise to the New Labour Project? As we have mentioned, the catalyst that hastened the demise of post-modernism and the rise of New Labour was the decline and fall of the USSR. The decline of the USSR and its eventual collapse brought to a head a longstanding conflict between traditionalists and modernizers in the communist parties of Western Europe. This conflict in many ways prefigured the similar struggle in the Labour Party in the early 1990s. Indeed, as we shall now see, many of the ideas that were to become central to the New Labour project were developed by the modernizers of the old Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).



New Labour: New Britain

Unlike its sister parties in France and Italy, the old CPGB had always remained a relatively small party. However, despite its size, the CPGB had from its inception exerted a considerable influence over the British labour movement. Right up until the late 1970s, the CPGB had maintained a highly organized presence within both the leadership and the rank and file of the trade unions. What is more, from the 1930s onwards the CPGB had been an important centre of attraction for left-wing intellectuals, whose ideas held significant sway over what was otherwise an atheoretical and pragmatic British labour movement.

With the industrial militancy of the early 1970s, many of the more 'realistic' elements of the British new left had been drawn to the CPGB. For those reacting against the utopianism and disorganization of the movements of 'post-68', the CPGB offered a highly disciplined organization that had deep roots within what could be seen as an increasingly militant working class. Of course, the CPGB was still very much of the old left: it remained very much a Stalinist party, while its aging militants were often socially conservative and were slavishly committed to an unquestioning defence of the USSR. Yet, in contrast to the response to the invasion of Hungary in 1956 where the Party had simply closed ranks against all internal and external critics of the USSR, the trauma caused in the CPGB by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 now seemed to open up the possibility for radical reform of the Party.

In their efforts to modernize the Party, new left intellectuals in and around the CPGB in the late 1970s began to import the 'third way' politics and theories of Euro-communism, which were at the time emerging in France and Italy. In attempting to find a 'third road' that could combine the democratic pluralism of liberal European capitalism with socialism, the advocates of Euro-communism required the old Communist parties to jettison both their last remaining revolutionary pretensions and their commitment to establishing a monolithic dictatorship of the proletariat. At the same time, the tired old dogmas and politics based on a rigid economic determinism, it was argued, had to be replaced by the far more subtle theories of social change that stressed the importance of culture – one of the principal source of such ideas being Antonio Gramsci.

Compared with France and Italy, the task of the British Euro-communist modernizers was perhaps far easier. The CPGB had long since abandoned any hope of displacing the Labour Party as the mass party of the working class and had instead adopted the role of guiding the Labour Party along the 'parliamentary road to socialism'. Indeed, by the early 1980s the modernizers were already able outmanoeuvre their Stalinist opponents to capture key positions in the CPGB, and had taken control of what was to become the Party's influential monthly journal – *Marxism Today*.

In becoming what was to be known as the house journal of 'yuppie socialism', *Marxism Today* did much to popularize, particularly amongst the rising post-68 generation of Labour politicians, the culturalist theories of both post-modernism and the neo-Gramscianism put forward by Stuart Hall and his fellow academics at the Centre for Cultural Studies at Birmingham University. At the same time *Marxism Today* also popularized the complementary theories of post-Fordism, which despite the post-structuralist anti-foundationalism of the post-modernist purists, could be seen to provide an updated and Marxist economic basis for both the culturalist theories of post-modernism and neo-Gramscianism.

Drawing on the theories of the French regulation school it was argued that the post-war boom of the 1950s and 1960s had been based on a Fordist regime of accumulation in which the mass production of standardized commodities had been balanced with their mass consumption through the implementation by the state of Keynesian policies of demand management. In the 1970s this regime of accumulation had gone into crisis, which had prompted a fundamental restructuring of capitalism. For the theorists of post-Fordism this restructuring had already given rise to the beginnings of a

new regime of accumulation based on flexible and specialized production, which allowed commodities to be customized to meet the tastes of relatively small groups of consumers. The emergence of this post-Fordist regime of accumulation underlay the shift away from the mass politics and mass culture that had been recognized by post-modernist writers.

This shift to post-Fordism meant that the old style of mass politics, which had underpinned old-style socialism and social democracy, was now out of date. It was argued that with her appeal to individual aspirations and advancement, Thatcher had already recognized this economic and cultural shift. What the 'left' needed to do was to abandon its old ways of thinking and take a leaf out of Thatcher's book. The 'left' had to appeal, not to collective class interests but to individuals as aspiring consumers. Just as Thatcher had built a Gramscian style 'hegemonic project' that had mobilized the cultural shift towards individualism and consumerism to shift Britain to the right, the 'Left' had to mobilize these very same tendencies to build a 'hegemonic project' that would push Britain in a more 'progressive' direction.

Following the fall of the USSR the modernizers of the CPGB succeeded in liquidating the Party, and promptly joined the mission to modernize the Labour Party. Several of the leading figures that had been associated with the now defunct *Marxism Today* became key advisors to the then still small cabal of modernizers that were coalescing around what was to become known as the New Labour project. These advisors not only contributed ideological ammunition to win arguments, but also their long experience of bureaucratic manoeuvring was to prove invaluable in capturing the controlling heights of the Labour Party.

Of course, the New Labour project, as a practical ruling ideology, was the result of a convergence of various and often mutually inconsistent ideas and theories. However, the ideas that had been promoted and popularized by *Marxism Today* played a vital part in distinguishing New Labour from both the social democratic politics of 'old Labour' and Thatcherism.

Combined with the fashionable theories of globalization, which claimed that the old social democratic and Keynesian policies that sought to manage national economies were no longer feasible, post-Fordism lent an air of inevitability to Thatcher's neo-liberal economic reforms. The social democratic political beliefs of old Labour were seen as arising from the now out-dated corporate and class politics of Fordism. As a consequence, it was argued that the Labour Party could no longer appeal to the class loyalty of those who 'worked by hand and brain' since the working class no longer identified themselves as producers but as individualistic consumers. There was therefore no alternative but to abandon efforts to appeal to collective solidarity and instead embrace the politics of 'individual choice'.

From a very early stage in her rule Stuart Hall had pointed out that Thatcher was not merely an old-style reactionary Tory. Her right-wing populism, which sought to promote 'a property owning democracy' and 'a popular capitalism' through the sell-off of council housing to council tenants and nationalized industries to the general public rather than to the financial institutions of the City, was in stark contrast to the elitism of the old Tory right-wing. Indeed, Thatcher had not only succeeded in breaking up the old social democratic post-war consensus but in doing so had also hastened the demise of the old establishment and the last

remnants of the old Victorian order that had upheld it. Hence, perhaps rather ironically, it was Thatcher that to have inaugurated what Gramsci might have seen as a top down 'passive revolution' that had served to modernize the British state and capitalism.

Nevertheless, although the New Labour ideologues were prepared to admit with hindsight that Thatcher's neo-liberal economic reforms were on the side of history, and hence in some sense 'progressive', there were key aspects of Thatcher's right-wing populism that were could only be considered reactionary. Her willingness in echoing the new racism of Enoch Powell in expressing fears that Britain would be 'swamped' by immigrants in the 1979 election campaign; her vehement militaristic British chauvinism displayed in her commitment to buying the hugely expensive Trident nuclear weapon system and her accompanying Cold War rhetoric; and her insistence on defending 'traditional family values', had all been essential to Thatcher's electoral appeal – particularly amongst lower middle class and working class voters born before the second world war.

As New Labour made clear right from the outset, following Tony Blair's election as leader of the Labour Party in 1994, there would be no return to the old social democratic policies of 'old Labour'; there would be no re-nationalization of the industries and public utilities privatized under the Tories, there would be no redistribution of wealth through high progressive taxation and there would be no repeal of the Tories' anti-trade union laws. New Labour made it clear it was committed to continuing the neo-liberal policies of the Thatcher and Major governments. However, within the limits of the post-Thatcher settlement New Labour promised to set different priorities to alleviate and rectify the worst aspects of Thatcher's legacy. After more than two decades of stringent curbs on public spending, New Labour promised increased investment in health and education, 'a New Deal to help the unemployed back in to work', higher welfare benefits targeted at the 'deserving poor' such as pensioners and 'poor hard-working families' and larger regeneration budgets for 'deprived areas'. These promises, coupled with the subsequent introduction of the minimum wage, offered some hope and relief to Labour's traditional supporters, particularly those in the old industrial cities of the North that had suffered the most from the defeats of organized labour by Thatcher and who had borne the brunt of her class vindictiveness.

However, the extent of these promises, and the degree to which they could be implemented in New Labour's first term of office, was severely circumscribed by the over-riding concern to restore government finances without reversing the tax cuts imposed by the previous Tory administrations. In order to make an appreciable difference, what little money that could be found from juggling the government's spending priorities had to be concentrated through targeting particular groups and areas.

Hence, in accepting the post-Thatcher settlement, the scope of the economic and material differences New Labour could offer were highly restricted. Instead, New Labour's broad appeal, which was to be central to its landslide victory in the 1997 election, was based on the promise to promote a 'new Britain' that would be inclusive, diverse and multicultural. The New Labour government would be in stark contrast to the narrow-minded social conservatism promoted by the previous Tory governments. Whereas both Major and Thatcher had repeatedly deplored the changes in

culture and sexual mores that had gathered pace since the 'permissive sixties', the New Labour government would embrace such changes and actively promote the equality of women and gays as well as religious and ethnic minorities and accept non-conventional families. Under New Labour, Britain would no longer look back to its imperialist past and define itself in terms of its military prowess; it would define itself in terms of its cultural dynamism exemplified by the then current trends of Britpop and Britart of 'cool Britannia'.

Having been repelled by the increasingly desperate attempts by Conservative leaders to rally its aging core supporters by moralistic speeches and policy initiatives; such as Peter Lilley's vilification of single mothers, 'section 28' of the 1988 Local Government Act, which banned local authorities from 'promoting' homosexuality, and John Major's much derided 'Back to Basics' sloganeering, for large sections of the electorate, particularly those belonging to those generations which had come of age since the 1960s, New Labour's 'New Britain' had a broad cross-class appeal. Yet New Labour's culturalism did not simply have a broad appeal to the electorate; more importantly it also appealed to key sections of the bourgeoisie.

Of course, in the boardrooms of Britain's major companies Thatcherism had been seen as vital in restoring the fortunes of British capitalism. But once the restructuring of British capitalism had been achieved the need for the Conservative Party to appease the xenophobia and euro-scepticism of its increasingly restless supporters had become more and more tiresome.

Now that it had embraced neo-liberalism, New Labour offered a welcome change. This was perhaps no more true than for the banks and financial institutions of the City of London. As one of the principal bastions of the old establishment the City of London had traditionally been the natural enemy of the Labour Party. However, New Labour was particularly in tune with the new meritocratic and cosmopolitan City of London that had emerged since the 'big bang'. As a centre for global finance capital, the new City of London had little time for conservative and imperialistic attitudes that had typified the old City. The new City exhibited a bourgeois multiculturalism: all cultures had to be given equal respect so long as they did not interfere with profit-making and the free movement of capital around the globe (i.e. they were just variegated forms of bourgeois culture). Indeed, as the City of London's emergence as the leading world centre outside the Middle East for 'Sharia compliant finance' necessary for the recycling of billions of petro-dollars has shown, cultural differences could be highly profitable for Labour's new friends in the city. [this is a point that perhaps needs expanding on later on]

Communitarianism and New Labour's 'Third Way'

New Labour, communitarianism and functional sociology

As we have seen, the largely French-inspired theories of neo-Gramscianism, Post-Fordism and indeed post-modernism, particularly as interpreted and popularized by *Marxism Today*, by changing the intellectual climate in and around the Labour Party, provided the bridge between new leftism and New Labour. However, for New Labour's key architects, the more immediate intellectual influences, which were to give rise to the practical politics and policies which were to define New Labour, came from across the Atlantic. Gordon Brown and Tony Blair drew inspiration for their 'Third Way' from the

apparent success of the policies then currently being implemented by Bill Clinton in the USA. In doing so they necessarily adopted much of the closely associated theories of functional sociology and communitarianism that underpinned and justified them. Hence, with Bill Clinton acting as the intermediary, Amitai Etzioni, the leading American theorist of communitarianism, was invited to give seminars to Labour Party policy makers in London. At the same time, Anthony Giddens, who had played a central role in reviving the functionalist sociology of Talcott Parsons in the 1980s, was commissioned to write the primer for New Labour's 'Third Way'.¹⁵

Functional sociology had developed in the 1950s as an ideological defence of the post-war settlement in America. As such it had upheld the principles of a pluralistic liberal democracy based a predominantly free market capitalist economy against not only what was seen as the totalitarian socialism of the USSR, but also British style social democracy.¹⁶ But, at the same time, it had to both justify and prescribe the limits of the increased role of the state that had come about as result of the 'big government' policies that had followed Roosevelt's New Deal of the 1930s. As a consequence, a central theme of functional sociology, and subsequently Communitarianism, was the problem that neither the liberal democratic state nor a market capitalist economy were sufficient in themselves in ensuring the social reproduction of capitalist society.

Although it was presumed to be the most efficient economic system, the market capitalist economy necessarily fragmented society into competing groups and individuals, all pursuing their own narrow, often divergent, self-interests. As a consequence, the capitalist economy necessarily gave rise to individual and group conflicts that were dysfunctional to the reproduction of society as a whole.

Of course, it was also presumed that the liberal democratic state provided the most rational means to overcome these conflicts. It could provide a legal framework, which could limit the dysfunctional actions of economic agents, and it could act as a neutral arbitrator in resolving conflicts of interests. Furthermore, it was also accepted that the state might intervene to address market failures, to ensure the provision of public goods and services that would not otherwise be provided by the private sector and to alleviate poverty and economic distress that might undermine public order.

But the problem was that by itself there was no guarantee that a liberal democratic state would actually act in these ways to resolve dysfunctional conflict and ensure the orderly reproduction of society. Indeed, if the pluralistic democratic political system simply reflected the conflicting interests of the economy then economic conflicts would simply be

¹⁵ A. Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Polity Press, Blackwell, 1998.

¹⁶ In his *The Structure of Social Action*, Free Press, New York, Talcott Parsons established the basis for his functional sociology through a review of the writings of what he saw as his forerunners; Alfred Marshall, Vilfredo Pareto, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. In his new introduction to the work in 1968, remarks 'On the theoretical side, the book concentrated on the the problem of the boundaries and limitations of economic theory. It did so in terms which did not follow the established lines of either the theory of "economic individualism" or its socialist opponents, even the British democratic socialists to say nothing of the Marxists.'

mirrored in the state. The state would then be captured and run by the politically most powerful sectional interests. The state may then exacerbate social conflicts and ultimately undermine the liberal democratic state itself. After all, the state could only act as an arbiter to the extent that it was perceived as being in some sense neutral. Furthermore, the rule of law in a liberal democracy depended on a degree of consent of those governed. The more the law was seen as being biased towards one group or class the more it would have to be imposed by authoritarian and repressive means.

Alternatively the state could rise above particular interests and impose what it saw as the general interests on the groups and interests of society as whole. But what was to prevent the state, or more specifically the state bureaucracy, from emerging as a particular interest like any other, and thereby end up imposing its particular interests as the 'general interest'?

Either way it seemed that a liberal democratic capitalism was doomed to either disintegrate into the disorder of competing interests due the centrifugal forces of the economy or else would end up with a totalitarian or authoritarian state. A liberal democratic free market capitalism would therefore seem to be unsustainable if not impossible.

However, for functionalist sociologists this was evidently not the case; liberal democratic free market capitalism was certainly alive and well in the USA if not elsewhere. What was it about actual liberal capitalist societies that ensured their orderly reproduction?

As we have seen, for the functionalist sociologists although the liberal democratic state and the free market capitalist economy were considered as providing the most rational and efficient *means* to achieving given political and economic ends, they did not determine these ends, nor could they ensure that such ends were congruent with each other. The question then was how were these ends determined and reconciled. The functionalist sociologists' answer was that liberal capitalist society necessarily gave rise to a distinct *cultural sphere* in which the amoral and asocial economic agents constituted by the competitive market were educated and socialized to become ethical citizens. As such, the ends pursued by groups and individuals were not merely those of narrow hedonistic self-interest but had a broader moral and social dimension. Furthermore, in interacting through this cultural sphere as ethical citizens, a general consensus could emerge that could reconcile particular interests through the emergence of a generally accepted idea of what was the 'common good' and 'public interest', which could then serve to define what should be the ends and purposes of state policy.

For the theorists of communitarianism the most important basis of this cultural sphere was the 'community'. Communities were constituted by the nexus of voluntary social relations between individuals that extended beyond the family, and as such were distinct from social relations mediated by the market and the state. The existence of communities became evident in the form of voluntary bodies, charitable institutions and in religious groups that actively bound their members together in the pursuit of ethical and moral ends.

Both the theorists of functional sociology and communitarianism could trace their origins back to the late nineteenth century. Whereas Talcott Parson's claimed his functional sociology was rooted in the classical sociology of Weber and Durkheim, communitarian theorists have traced

their ideas back to the British philosopher, Thomas Hill Green. Green's philosophy had been an attempt to go beyond what he saw as the limitations of utilitarianism that had underpinned classical economic and political liberalism of the early nineteenth century. In doing so he came to reject the long tradition of British empiricism and instead looked to the classical German philosophy of both Kant and Hegel. By the end of the nineteenth century Green's philosophical works had gained considerable influence amongst British intellectuals and provided one of the central foundations for the ideas of New Liberalism that was to guide the policies of Liberal Party at the turn of the century.¹⁷

Both the classical sociology of Weber and Durkheim, and the philosophy of Green can be seen as part of the broader re-orientation of bourgeois social theory that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century in response to 'the social question' and the problem of defending the existing order posed by the rise of organized labour.¹⁸ Of course, the problem of ensuring the orderly reproduction of capitalism, particularly in relation to the working class, had long been an issue for bourgeois social theorists. Adam Smith, writing a hundred years before, had warned of the dangers that could arise from the mind-numbing effects of factory production and the material deprivation caused by the drive to force wages down to a bare subsistence level. Smith feared that these consequences of capitalist accumulation might threaten social cohesion through both the material and moral degradation of the working classes. The possible breakdown of the social reproduction of the working class because of material and moral deprivation was to be a recurrent concern for classical political economists and other bourgeois theorists right down to the mid-nineteenth century.

However, with the advance of organized labour from the middle of the nineteenth century, the main concern of bourgeois theorists became less that the material deprivation of the working class would lead to family break down, rising crime and the spread of disease. Instead the main concern of the bourgeoisie was that the growing strength of an organized working class would ultimately lead to revolution and the expropriation of private property. The response to this threat had been to make timely political and economic concessions that aimed to integrate the organized working class within bourgeois society both collectively and individually. This had led to the radical re-orientation and re-organization of bourgeois social theory in order to provide the theoretical framework to understand and guide such reforms.

New Liberalism had sought to both forestall the advance of the labour movement through social reforms and, at the same time harness its power in the fight against the old establishment and the continued power of landed property. However, following the first world war, the Liberal Party, and with it New Liberalism, was overtaken and sidelined by the electoral success of the Labour Party and the statist politics of

¹⁷ This resonated well with Tony Blair who had barely disguised disdain for the social democratic politics of old labour that for him had been an unfortunate detour in the advance of 'progressive politics' in 20th Century.

¹⁸ See Simon Clarke, *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1991.

social democracy. As a consequence, Green, and his neo-Hegelian philosophy, was soon forgotten.¹⁹

In Britain social democracy became established with the post-war settlement; which saw the establishment of a comprehensive welfare state, extensive public ownership of the economy and a commitment to full employment. Social democracy served to integrate the working class within British capital and the British state by *representing* it as a class-for-itself, via the organizational forms of the Labour Party and the trade union movement. Yet at the same time as *representing* the working class as a class-for-itself – that is as a class that was both conscious of itself as a class, and sufficiently organized to advance its own interest as a class – social democracy served to preserve the working class as a class-in-itself – that is a mere aggregate of individualized workers and consumers. If social democracy was to advance the collective interests of labour and wring concessions out of the bourgeoisie it had to be able to mobilize the working class to take political and industrial action. However, at the

same time, to the extent that such concessions were ultimately dependent on the continued accumulation of capital, social democracy had to contain working class militancy within acceptable limits – it had to demobilize the working class.

This contradiction within social democracy, together with the changing technical class composition brought about by the decline of British manufacturing – came to the fore in the crisis and capitalist restructuring of the 1970s and 1980s. The very success of entrenching social democratic reforms in the post-war era had served to undermine the ability of both the Party and the trade union movement to both mobilize and demobilize the working class as a class. Social democracy had become hollowed out, making it vulnerable both to the working class offensive that threatened to go beyond the limits of capital, and to the subsequent bourgeois counter-offensive, which was to begin in earnest under premiership of Thatcher.

Thatcher was able to turn back the advance of social democracy through a two-pronged attack. Firstly, she broke the collective strength of organized labour through mass unemployment, a battery of anti-strike laws and ultimately through police repression. In doing so she sought to make it clear that any attempts by the working class to advance their interests through collective action and class solidarity was futile. At the same time, Thatcher sought to integrate the working class directly as individualized workers and consumers through her policies and ideology of 'popular capitalism'. While collective action and solidarity may be futile, there would be plenty of opportunities for working class individuals and their families to advance themselves.

However, although growing economic prosperity following the restructuring of capital in the 1980s had allowed large sections of the aspiring working class to be

integrated directly within bourgeois society, Thatcher's neo-liberal policies had marginalized and 'excluded' significant sections of the working class, which in American terms threatened to become an 'underclass'.²⁰ Thatcher may have defeated the 'enemy within' of organized labour but in doing so she had left a legacy of mass unemployment, family breakdown and growing levels of crime in many of Britain's declining inner cities. The 'social question' was no longer the problem of organized labour but once again the problem of 'social cohesion' and 'social inclusion'.

Communitarian social theory was adopted by New Labour as the theoretical framework to address this 'problem of the working class'. Indeed, with the emergence of the new conservatism of David Cameron, the arguments of communitarianism have become an essential part of the ruling political consensus and ideology. As Cameron puts it: if Thatcher mended the broken economy now the problem is to mend the broken society.



Communitarianism as ideology and practice

Communitarian theorists argued that the establishment of the welfare state, combined with the hedonistic individualism promoted by both the spread of the 1960's counter-culture and the neo-liberalism of the 1980s, had undermined the sense of community and social responsibility that were essential in holding society together. In a diverse multi-cultural society, in which the standard traditional family was in irrevocable decline, the appeals to national unity and a return to family values put forward by the right were no longer sufficient to ensure social cohesion. Yet calls for the extension of rights and entitlements and for the redistribution of wealth to deal with the 'social problem' were also out of date. For the communitarians, rights and entitlements had to be balanced with social obligations and duties. At the same time the state had to take a more extensive and proactive role in fostering communities.

For many of those in the post-68 generation who were now reaching senior positions within the management of the state and capital, these arguments had a certain resonance. First of all, the communitarian idea of 'community' was certainly reminiscent of the notion of 'gemeinschaft' – as a social form based on direct and unalienated human relations – that had gained a wide currency in the new left in the '60s and '70s, and which had been used as the basis of the criticism of

19 Green's neo-Hegelian philosophy, having emerged with the incipient advance of organized labour and having been eclipsed by the subsequent rise of social democracy, has been revived by Communitarian social theorists with the retreat of organized labour and social democracy. Indeed it is perhaps also no surprise that this revival of Green's philosophy first emerged in the USA, where advance of social democracy was most limited in the Western world, and in conjunction with American functional sociology that had originally emerged at least in partial opposition to Western European social democratic ideas.

²⁰ Of course, the notion of an 'underclass', which carries with it the ideological baggage of welfare dependency etc., is highly controversial and one that we would not accept ourselves.

the alienated social forms of the commodity and the state. Secondly, the communitarian stress on the plurality of communities was in accord with the emerging consensus around multi-culturalism and contrasted with both the narrow and outdated monoculturalism and individualism of Thatcher and Powell. Thirdly, the communitarians' rejection of the libertarianism of '60s counter-culture and their stress on social duties no doubt chimed for many in the post-68 generation, who were now middle-aged with their own family responsibilities. Finally, for those in New Labour, who were now taking over the running of the state, communitarianism offered a new role for state intervention in society now that 'globalization' had supposedly ruled out effective state intervention in the economy.

Although communitarianism may claim to be class neutral in theory, this is certainly not the case in the ideology and practice of New Labour. For the bourgeoisie and the middle classes attempts to promote social responsibility and a sense of community have been based merely on exhortation and incentives. The middle classes have been urged to be ethical consumers and recycle their rubbish, while companies have been encouraged to adopt policies of corporate responsibility and engage with their 'community'. But 'community engagement' usually means increased 'networking' with national and local politicians and government administrators that has been necessary to prepare the way for public-private partnerships, private finance initiatives and other forms of privatization of public services, which have required a breakdown of the old divisions between the public and private sector.

In contrast, New Labour's attempts to inculcate a sense of social responsibility in the 'problem' sections of the working class have taken on a far more coercive aspect. Pseudo-contracts have been imposed on the unemployed, parents and those in council or social housing. Failure to comply with what New Labour deems as adequate socially acceptable behaviour can lead to benefit cuts or even eviction. Furthermore, in order to promote a sense of community, particularly in 'problem neighbourhoods', by curbing anti-social behaviour, neighbours have been encouraged to grass each other up to the authorities over the most minor of nuances. Instead of intervening as a last resort to arbitrate in neighbourly disputes, the authorities take sides. With the consequent issuing of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) quite draconian restrictions can be placed on individuals alleged to be guilty of anti-social behaviour, often merely on the basis of hearsay evidence and with little immediate opportunity to contest the case made out against them.

In short, 'community' has become a vacuous term in New Labour speak. On the one hand it has merely served as a cover for privatization. On the other hand it has been used to justify the increasingly intrusive policing of sections of the working class. Indeed, rather ironically, communitarianism in practice has served to pre-empt any emergence of any sense of community and social solidarity that might be in any way in opposition to the state and capital.

The fundamental problem of communitarian theory is that the problem of the decline of Community is not a simple result of social policy. It is a problem resulting from capital itself. The advance of capital into every facet of life necessarily leads to the destruction of direct human relations and their replacement by the alienated forms of the commodity and the state. Capital and human community do

not simply exist side by side but are in antagonistic relation to each other. Thus, in promoting the advance of capital's rule through their neoliberal policies New Labour serves to undermine and hollows out the communities that they claim to wish to promote.

Indeed, in their efforts to promote and 'engage with the community', state agencies have had to invent quite abstract and empty 'communities. Hence, for example, everyone living in a certain area is deemed to constitute 'the local community', everyone who is gay constitutes 'the gay community', anyone who happens to be disabled is part of 'the disabled community' and so forth even if the members of these communities have no connection with each other than within the heads of state administrators.²¹

This is not to say that communities in some sense do not exist in Britain. However, the strongest communities are the vestiges of those traditional and pre-capitalist forms of community that have been transplanted from the Indian sub-continent as a result of successive waves of immigration since the 1950s. As we shall see in Part II, it is these Asian communities that were seized upon and vigorously promoted by New Labour politicians, not only for ideological reasons but for practical political purposes. These communities, with their traditional social conservatism, not only serve to exemplify New Labour's idea of 'community' but also, through their communalist politics, served to provide a vital electoral base for New Labour.



²¹ A blatant example of the far reaching effect of the ideology of 'community' occurred in Brighton at the time of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006. The Palestine Solidarity Campaign and the local anti-war movement had called for two local demonstrations against the invasion. The second demonstration was heavily policed, which drew criticisms from the local newspaper. Instead of justifying their actions on the traditional grounds of maintaining public order, the police argued that they were defending Brighton's 'Jewish Community'

Part 2: The establishment of the 'British muslim community'

Introduction

Until about 20 years ago there was no such thing as a 'British muslim community'. In this part of the article we will see how the 'British muslim community' emerged out of the socio-political development which also brought about the rise of New Labour: the retreat of class struggle both internationally and in the UK, the related retreat of social democracy which sought to represent the working class, and the increase of social mobility as a result of the post-war settlement. An important question is how the 'British muslim community' was created from the existing muslim communities in Britain, and why this development did not lead to other national identifications such as, for example, a 'British Black community'.

In order to answer this question, we will first consider the creation and characters of the concrete communities of immigrants in Britain, their differences and the specificity of south Asian muslim communities. Next we will see how two historical factors (the application of the so-called 'multiculturalist' strategies in the UK and the rise of political Islam) contributed to the formation of the present concept of 'British muslim community' and the creation of a body which represents it. In particular, we will see how the same social and historical context promoted, on the one hand, the ascendance of a highly politicized Asian middle class, able to constitute a representative body for an abstractly defined 'muslim community' at a national level. Yet, on the other hand, this same social and historical context tended to increasingly divide the concrete Asian communities. We will also see that these two aspects of the 'British muslim community', its concrete division and abstract unity, were necessary and opposite and reflected a dynamic of mutual support and power antagonisms between the *petit bourgeoisie* within the muslim communities and the ascendant middle class.

Immigration in the UK and the creation of muslim communities

In this section we will consider the context created by the retreat of class struggle and the establishment of the socio-political strategy of 'multiculturalism'. This strategy was first pioneered in the 1980s by new left Labour in the Great London Council (GLC) and other councils with a large presence of black/Asian populations as a response to the anti racist riots which had threatened the political stability of Britain – and was later developed at a national level under the New Labour government. We will look at the relation between the ideology behind the multiculturalist strategy (which we have introduced in the previous part) and its concrete nature as a specific class alliance. We will also see how this strategy aimed at dividing the working class along ethnic lines and encouraged, as a consequence, increasing divisions within the concrete Asian communities.

The largest waves of immigration came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, and were mainly from the West Indies and the Indian subcontinent, major parts of the British empire. In

the '50s the government, started a campaign of recruitment of manpower from the West Indies in order to fill the demand for labour of the post-war boom. Young men mostly from Jamaica and Barbados were used to fill labour demands for menial work in the public sector (National Health Service, British National Rail, bus services etc.).

Also, following the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947, thousands of Indians and Pakistanis (including people from the area which would become Bangladesh) emigrated to Britain. People from south Asia tended to find jobs in factories in industrialized areas of England, some of them, who had capital to invest, opened corner shops or ran post offices. Following the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971 a new wave of Pakistani and Bangladeshi people arrived and settled in Britain.

Until the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962 all Commonwealth citizens were able to come to Britain without any restrictions. However, from the 1960s through the 1970s British legislation increasingly limited immigration, while however facilitating the arrival of spouses and close relatives through so-called 'family reunification schemes'.¹ These family reunification schemes were historically fundamental for the creation of immigrants' communities in Britain.

Immigrants from same areas tended to cluster together in areas where rents were cheaper, people spoke the same language or, when it was the case, they already had some family or village connections. This tendency created large urban areas of given ethnic populations e.g., Brixton in London. However, clustering together does not in itself create 'communities' and does not explain the structure or character of existing communities. The characters of various communities and their differences were the result of historical and social factors: the character of the original social relations, how far these relations were transplanted to Britain, and the opportunity they had to be reproduced.

West Indian workers were recruited from among the poorest plantation workers in Jamaica or Barbados. They originated from African slaves, and their family structures were traditionally matriarchal and non hierarchical. The process of emigration, implemented through British government schemes, weakened and often disintegrated the immigrants' family relations. This does not mean that African-Caribbeans did not make efforts to create relations of solidarity or 'communities': they felt the brunt of racism even more strongly than Asians and had to struggle to survive against widespread white British hostility and discrimination. In these conditions, women would often join together in self-help groups and female relatives would try, as much as possible, to live in the same neighbourhood in order to support each other.

¹ Between the 1960s and 1970s the government began to impose limits to further immigration and the right to automatic citizenship (1961 The Commonwealth Immigration Act and more strict amendment/regulations in '68, '69, '71, '81). By the '70s 'automatic' citizenship was recognized only to 'patrials' (English, Welsh, Scottish) and skin colour started to be an issue.

In contrast the Asian communities were both highly hierarchical and patriarchal, and allowed for tight control of individuals and families by community leaders. These relations were deeply rooted in south Asian society and had the opportunity to be re-created in Britain. While African-Caribbeans were recruited by the British government under government schemes, south Asians who moved to Britain did so on their own initiative. Men from relatively wealthy and powerful families who could afford to travel and set themselves up in Britain would then attract individuals from their same village, helping them to find jobs and accommodation. The power structure of the original village structure was then reproduced in Britain on the basis of patron-client relations – ethnic identity was then based on a material, economic, relation of dependence, fundamental for the individual's reproduction and survival in an alien country.

The various inter-relations of power among families were then reproduced in the new generations through subsequent arranged marriages, which connected families together, and which could be implemented through strong patriarchal authority. Thus, while a patriarchal Asian community would be reproduced as a closed community, the loose and matriarchal African-Caribbean community was more amenable to integration in wider British society.

Besides the communities of south Asians, muslim immigrants came to Britain in smaller numbers from other areas of the world. For example, Asians emigrated to Britain from African countries such as Kenya or Uganda following their independence from Britain. Many of these emigrants had been part of a relatively privileged social layer and the middle class in the African countries of origin, and were more likely to integrate into wider British society as bourgeois individuals.²

Other muslim immigrants in the UK were Arabs or Persians allowed into the UK from the Middle East as refugees. Although they too tended to join relatives and hence cluster together in given areas, they had no opportunity to form structured communities like those of Indians, Pakistanis or Bangladeshis, as they trickled into the country as individuals under, by then, extremely tight immigration restrictions. Furthermore, despite sharing the same religion they did not, and could not, integrate themselves within the already established south Asian communities.

Thus at the dawn of the establishment of 'muslim Britain' there was no such 'muslim' unifying identity at all.³ The process of immigration seen above created structured communities of south Asians tightly tied together through family connections and arranged marriages. These communities were separated not only from the white British

population, the African-Caribbeans, and other Arab immigrants, but they were also divided between themselves. Not only were south Asians in Britain divided by nationality and languages, not only might they originate from countries which were alien or hostile to each other, but they were also divided into even smaller, closed, extended family groups: there were, for example, Sylhetis (or better families from the Sylhet area of Bangladesh: Sunamganj, Habiganj, Beani Bazar, Maulvi Bazar, etc.), not 'Bangladeshi' – let alone 'muslims'!



The community, the individual and the class

The community structures imported from south Asia to Britain faced contradictory forces within the British capitalist system.

On the one hand, African-Caribbean and Asian immigrants experienced racial hostility from the native white lower middle class and sections of the working class.⁴ This separation and hostility forced the individuals to look within their community for mutual help and solidarity and tended to reinforce the community as a closed system.

On the other, the direct social relations within communities could only survive and reproduce themselves through commercial relations with an outside – the capitalist system in which the community was immersed. This would inevitably weaken the direct relations in the community: when what counts is the money in the individual's pocket, the relevance of personal relations of gratitude, loyalty and kinship start to be put under question.⁵

The process of fragmentation and individualization was of course stronger for the new British-born generations, who felt less strong ties with their original families in Asia, and who

² The British empire based its control over African colonies through a layer of Asian middle class transplanted to Africa from south Asia. This Asian social layer was both privileged and dependable as British rule was crucial for their survival. With the independence of British African colonies, many businessmen and middle class Asians were allowed into the UK to escape reprisal. Also, between 1965 and the beginning of the '70s Uganda expelled all the 50,000 Gujarati Indians from Uganda.

³ It was true that the individual's religion was important, yet it was not the fundamental factor in their social relations and reproduction.

⁴ Racism was the consequence of the same capitalist policies which encouraged immigration. We have said that immigration was allowed by the government because of the need for reconstruction in the post-war boom. However, behind the 'need for reconstruction', there was also the need to break the union strength of the British working class. Many trade unionists would consequently see immigrant workers as a threat to their power and to the establishment which this power was rooted in. The increasing number of immigrants in Britain soon became an issue for racist and conservative fears.

⁵ These tensions would also create double standards within families. Often working men felt under pressure to adopt westernized habits while still keeping their women inside and imposing their patriarchal authority on them.

tended to assimilate with other children at school or outside school. These young people experienced conflicting feelings toward their authoritarian family and society, which protected and nurtured them, but also exercised control over them. They resented being packaged for an arranged marriage, when their schoolmates talked about romance. They were excited about experimenting with music, drugs or other activities which their parents would find objectionable.

While capitalism tended to fragment the community into bourgeois individuals, it also constituted the condition for alternative, class based solidarity. The Asian working class had to earn a wage to live, and, as all the working class, experienced alienation, antagonism, and the material need to oppose capital collectively. In addition, it was not true that all of south Asia was a backward pre-capitalist blob. Many workers came from areas of India and Pakistan where capitalism had already established its contradictions through the British empire and had already experience of unionized struggles in workplaces, and a secular and Marxist perspective.⁶ By the 1950s the Communist party was a major political force in India, showing that the workers movement which it sought to represent was certainly not a tiny drop in the ocean of a fundamentally religious-based society.

Indian workers imported their traditions of unionized class struggle to Britain long before the 1950s: the 'Indian Workers Association' (IWA) was formed among a very small number of Indian workers in the 1930s to support the struggle for independence in their country of origin. After the immigration waves of the 1950s the IWA saw a revival and inspired the creation of the 'Pakistani Workers Association' (PWA) and the 'Bangladeshi Workers Association' (BWA), which organized industrial workers. During the '60s and '70s these organizations were involved in struggles for equality in workplaces, against the increasingly strict immigration government policies, and against racism.

The IWA (PWA and BWA) were pulled and pushed by the contradictions mentioned above. On the one hand these Asian workers' organizations often reflected separations inherited from the Asian subcontinent (castes, families, etc.). On the other, the praxis of struggle necessitated the creation of common understanding and solidarity across ethnic divisions. During the '60s and '70s the Asian workers organizations created wide fronts with white workers' organizations, leftwing parties and anti-racism campaigners in struggles against racism.

The separation of white and immigrant workers created by government policies, as well as the internal 'community' divisions among the Asian workers themselves, were thus challenged by active participation to common struggle. This practical experience was reflected by the development of consciousness among the Asian organized working class. Class identity, equality, solidarity across ethnic groups and races, challenged not only the racism of white union leaders and the white right wing, but also the identity of the Asian individual originally defined along community lines.



The new generation's struggles – the riots of 1981

Around the beginning of the 1980s young Asian people were protagonists in street riots in urban areas across Britain.

African-Caribbean youth were not new to street riots – since the late 1950s they had clashed with racist white youth and the police.⁷ Yet these new riots would have a different character: they would not be 'race riots' but anti-police, anti-fascist insurrections; and African Caribbeans, Asian and white youth would take part in these battles against the common enemy, or would emulate each other in different towns. The riots peaked in 1981, when fights and battles spread across Britain like wildfire (Brixton, Toxteth, Southall, Moss Side, Leeds, Handsworth, Leicester, Halifax, Bedford, Gloucester, Coventry, Bristol...).

Before the beginning of the '80s Asian youth were not generally involved in riots. Protected but also disciplined by their patriarchal, authoritarian families, they could see a future for themselves in their fathers' industry or shop and felt no incentive to rebel. In contrast, African-Caribbean youth came into confrontation with the established social order long before Asians did precisely because their communities were not as closed and structured, and individuals had to try to integrate earlier within British society. As a consequence, they were more vulnerable to racism and discrimination.

However, with the end of the '70s and the Thatcher era things would also change for Asian youth. With the closure of large factories in the north and mass unemployment the struggle was bound to move from the factory to the street, and would involve the younger generation.

This new wave of struggles had an effect on the understanding and self-identity of the new generation of Asians. Groups involved in those struggles would meet, discuss and think about demands and possibilities, developing the conscious side of their practical experience. One of these organizations was the 'Asian Youth Movement'. The AYM reflected the emergence of a new cross-ethnic identity, which was precisely the result of solidarity across ethnic and/or

⁶ However distorted by the dominant Stalinist ideology at the time.

⁷ For example the 1958 riots in Nottingham and in Notting Hill (London), caused by fights between white and African-Caribbean youth.

religious divisions. In order to challenge any such divisions, the participants defined themselves as 'black', a positive and inclusive definition taken up in spite of racist propaganda. Also the AYM reflected a common identification of the enemy in the repressive authorities (including the police and the threat of fascism). Significantly, and coherently, the AYM would also attack and criticize despotism within their own community – the power of the mosques and the imposition of patriarchal authority, above all on women.

While capitalism tended to separate the new British-born generation of Asians from their own communities and turn them into individuals desiring bourgeois freedom, these struggles created a secular, non-religious, non-ethnic unity, which could provide these young people with the strength to challenge their traditional authorities.

This secular and non-ethnic consciousness mirrored the practical unity of the participants in the antifascist riots of the '80s, which was the fundamental factor that made them politically relevant. Indeed, it was precisely because these riots were not 'ethnic' riots that they could spread across Britain threatening Thatcher's authority.

The obvious response from the state to this threat was therefore to divide the class – and the obvious dividing line was the ethnic. With the Scarman report in 1981 the state began to construe the problem of rebellious youth as a mainly racial and ethnic issue.

It was true, as Scarman noted, that racist policing and discrimination were an issue for black people – yet Scarman looked at young people's antagonism to the state, which had common grounds and a common enemy, and reduced it into an 'ethnic' or 'minority' issue. Its recommendations for the local authorities, to adopt 'community policies' which tackled ethnic issues, would fit more with the New Labour ideology of multiculturalism than the old Tory ideology. In fact, as we will see next, these recommendations would be brought into practice within the so-called multiculturalist strategy by (mostly) Labour councils and would divide and pit sections of the class against each other: precisely, along ethnic lines.

A response: The multiculturalist policy

As an answer to the riots, since the beginning of the '80s a number of local authorities pioneered a new specific social policy, which would be called 'multiculturalist policy' (or simply multiculturalism).⁸

The GLC led by Ken Livingstone began the most renowned multiculturalist project, made of 'consultations' with 'ethnic communities' regarding the public sector, 'equal opportunity' policies, and the establishment of race relations units in the Council and the police.⁹ Within this initiative, representatives from ethnic communities would be also given roles within public institutions (such as hospitals, schools, etc.) and in the Council. A whole new network of relations between the local

authorities and individuals within the 'ethnic' communities was encouraged to develop.

Bradford council started a similar project in 1981, in the aftermath of the city's riots, and issued a race-relations plan which declared Bradford a 'multiracial, multicultural city'.¹⁰

Through the '80s to the '90s multiculturalism would grow from a 'loony lefty' practice limited to a handful of councils to a mainstream, widely accepted, ideology, whose vocabulary is unquestionably accepted as 'common sense' and would have a central role in the social policies of New Labour.

Within the multiculturalist strategy councils like Bradford financially supported the creation of lobby groups around cliques of notables and authoritative 'community leaders'. This normally led to the creation of 'councils of mosques' or other similar religious lobbies: for example, Bradford Council supported the creation of the Bradford Council of Mosques; the Federation for Sikh Organizations and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad.¹¹

Within the multiculturalist strategy, religious organizations received funds from local authorities and were treated as main interlocutors – this role would strengthen their prestige and power within their 'community'. In return, they were delegated a number of social activities through which they would get in touch and control individuals in their community (e.g. care for the elderly or the management of unemployment).¹²

Behind its postmodern gloss and its sentimentality for ethnic and cultural diversity, then, the multiculturalist project constituted a new class alliance. It meant in practice the redirection of wealth from the working class within the community to their leaders and their pet projects.¹³

It is important to add that the multiculturalist policies tended to privilege the Asian communities and would then pave the way to the future development of a 'muslim Britain' – instead of a 'black Britain'. As the multiculturalist strategy relied on the authority of 'community leaders' to re-impose social order within their communities, since the beginning, it tended to neglect the African-Caribbean 'communities': unlike the Asian structured, patriarchal communities, the prevalently matriarchal African-Caribbean communities, loose and lacking structured means to control their youths, were not convincing partners for the local authorities.

This would create the increasingly strong liaison between new Labour politicians and the south Asian communities – which would lay the foundations for the alliance of New Labour and the 'British muslim community'.

¹⁰ Malik, op. cit.

¹¹ A long list of commentators (e.g. Arun Kundnani, 'The death of multiculturalism', *Race and Class*, 2002 <http://www.ircr.org.uk/2002/april/ak000001.html>) compared the multiculturalist strategy with the colonial arrangement adopted by the British empire in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, where they would rely on the authority of 'community leaders' through their extended family networks for ensuring local control.

¹² 'Jihad' by Gilles Kepel, p. 198

¹³ Of course no Labour politician would say that the aim of multiculturalist strategies was to redirect wealth away from the working class. The promoters of multiculturalism really believed that by allowing funds for promoting ethnic culture and religion they gave the 'ethnic minorities' what they really wanted.

⁸ We will use the term 'multiculturalist strategy' for the implementation of specific policies and 'multiculturalism' for the underlying ideology discussed in Part 1.

⁹ Kenan Malik, 'The trouble with multiculturalism'

<http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/00000002D35E.htm>

Identity as ethnic identity

For the Asians who had experienced class struggle in the '70s, the re-imposition of bourgeois law and order on the street and market discipline would through the '80s signal the abandonment of class identity.

The retreat of class struggle left a void – bourgeois fragmentation. Paradoxically, but not surprisingly, this fragmentation and separation was encouraged by the implementation of multiculturalist policies: by offering funds to groups in recognition to their cultural identity, these policies constituted a major material factor which helped to fragment the Asian population into competing ethnic groups, alien and often hostile to each other.

Also secularism declined as religious issues were now encouraged to emerge, welcomed from both sides of the multiculturalist alliance. From the perspective of community leaders, indeed, religious issues were about re-establishing their social control. While for those who were to become the New Labour ruling elite, the celebration of 'ethnic' and traditional cultures was a 'radical', excitingly postmodern and safely classless alternative to the anti-establishment ideas of the '70s.

Crucially, however, the creation of religious lobbies having a role in local political life would encourage the transformation of cultural issues into political demands. This was particularly true for the muslim lobbies since this transformation coincided with the popularity of political Islam as a political ideology based on religion.

Thus throughout the 1980s muslim lobbies which had been set up and supported by local authorities became the focus for vociferous campaigns and protests over religious demands, rallying the people of their community in support. As an important example, the Bradford Council of Mosques began campaigning in 1983 over single sex classes, the provision of halal meat in schools, and other such issues and involved parents and young people in these protests.¹⁴ In return for lobbying and protesting the working class was offered a spectacular contemplation of the abstract power of 'their community' vis-à-vis the outer world (mainly white, and western). This power was in fact the concrete power of religious leaders vis-à-vis their faithful.

We will see that this political activity would allow lobbies such as the Bradford Council of Mosques to acquire a key role in the creation of 'muslim Britain'.

A new unity in political Islam and the emergence of the 'British muslim community'

A key element essential to the establishment of the 'British muslim community' was the rise at a world level of the ideology and practice of political Islam, following the end of the cold war, the decline of national liberation movements and

of social democracy. In this section we will see how political Islam provided the ideological grounds for an abstract unification of concretely fragmented muslim communities and how national struggles around Islamic issues promoted the constitution of national lobby groups which would act as representatives of the 'British muslim community' vis-à-vis the emerging New Labour government. We will also consider the paradoxes of the abstract unity and concrete divisions of this representative body and the power and class conflicts expressed by them.



The retreat of class struggle and the rise of political Islam world-wide

Multiculturalism was only one side which encouraged the emergence of the so-called 'muslim community' in Britain: the other was the rise of political Islam.¹⁵

The conjuncture of the new class alliance based on multiculturalist policies and the rise of political Islam was not a coincidence. These two facts originated from the same historical change: the retreat of class struggle internationally, the consequent retreat of social democracy, the end of the cold war and of national liberation movements across the globe. In muslim countries the retreat of pan-Arab and Stalinist

¹⁴ Even people belonging to the AYM got involved in the protests for halal meat at school, but this was only the beginning of the end: *the AYM would soon disappear*. Analogously, elements from the vanishing BWA and PWA would be involved in organizing national demonstrations of 'muslims' around the Rushdie affair.

¹⁵ In this article, by the term 'political Islam' (and Islamism) we intend any ideology which interprets Islam as essential part of a political programme. This definition is very broad: political Islamist organizations were created in different contexts and had very different class bases and specific issues, yet they shared some fundamental ideological presuppositions.

modernising tendencies encouraged the resurgence of Islamist movements.

The Islamist 'Muslim Brotherhood',¹⁶ notorious for assaulting left wing militants in the streets of Cairo and organising assassinations of Egyptian government leaders, re-emerged at the end of the 1970s. The Muslim Brotherhood had been suppressed in Egypt in 1948 but spread to other muslim countries as an underground organization. With the decadence of pan-Arabism, the Muslim Brotherhood had the opportunity to be resuscitated.¹⁷ Encouraged by the possibility offered by the new political situation to impose itself as a mainstream political current, the Muslim Brothers' organisations in most countries have recently undergone a facelift of bourgeois respectability.¹⁸

In 1978-9 the US, Saudi Arabia and the Pakistani government funded and encouraged Islamist combatants¹⁹ to fight the USSR occupation of Afghanistan. At an ideological level, this war served to confer prestige to key promoters, first in line Saudi Arabia and its version of strict and anti-west Islamic fundamentalism, Wahhabism.

Concurrent with the war in Afghanistan was the 'Iranian Revolution' of 1979. The revolution in Iran against the old pro-US regime of the Shah was the outcome of a widespread social insurrection which followed intense struggles and strikes in workplaces. Despite the great mobilization of the class, eventually the revolution was recuperated and subdued under an Islamic regime led by the Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Rudollah Musavi Khomeini.

Since 1979, rivalry over influence of the Islamic world would continue between Khomeini and the Saudi establishment. Wahhabi's world-wide prestige was based on oil revenues donated by Riyadh to Islamic groups and 'charities' worldwide. It was for example Saudi Arabia which massively funded the construction of recent new mosques in the UK. Saudi Arabia also controlled the publication of religious materials for world-wide distribution. This had a profound effect in the diffusion of political Islam in the UK in the '80s and '90s.

While Saudi Arabia based its influence on the material power of money, the rising Shia star preferred to count on the immaterial glitter of ideology. The international fury at the end of the '80s around the Rushdie affair offered to Khomeini the unmissable opportunity to become the recognized worldwide champion of Islam: using his authority as Ayatollah, Khomeini issued an Islamic order ('fatwa'), asking all muslims to try to kill the British writer and muslim renegade. Eventually, the 'fatwa' deflated. Despite the fact that all of the Islamist world

was united in morally condemning Rushdie, the fatwa was opposed by most Islamist organizations, and neglected by the sullen Saudi regime and eventually nobody bothered to kill Rushdie.²⁰ However, we will see that the Rushdie affair would be central to the creation of a national organization representing the 'muslim community' in Britain.

The retreat of class struggle and the rise of political Islam in Britain

In Britain, the retreat of class struggle, the atomization of muslim individuals and the new social mobility of the Thatcher years prepared the terrain for the appeal of political Islam. Political Islam was a new ideology which predicated the unity of muslims not only across national states, but, importantly, across local communities – the unity of individuals as abstract muslims. Political Islam had thus an appeal for those individuals whose traditional ties had been weakened and for whom the community-based traditions of their fathers had lost their relevance. These were two specific different categories of muslims: the emerging middle class and the youth.

We have seen that in the 1980s a new generation of middle class emerged from the lower classes, thanks to the social mobility of the post-war years. These were not only New Labour politicians (as mentioned in Part 1), but also individuals from ethnic communities, including Asians. However, climbing the social ladder into mainstream Britain also implied the weakening of old ties and the fragmentation of the middle class as bourgeois individuals. Political Islam offered to these middle class individuals a form of Islamic belonging and political identity which did not need to be based on old social ties and practices – in practice, an abstract bourgeois, new world-view.

Middle class professionals and businessmen, who need to be considered part of the respectable socio-political establishment, tend to favour moderate forms of Islamism, like Jamaat e-Islami and the Muslim Brotherhood. Jamaat e-Islami originated in Pakistan during the Pakistan war and has a special appeal for individuals of Pakistani descent. The Muslim Brotherhood has a similar appeal for muslims of Arab descent.

For the youngest generations political Islam would offer an answer to isolation, to the frustration and the void created by the retreat of class struggle and the years of Thatcher's individualism. To these young people, political Islam presents itself as a political force able to challenge the status quo and oppose the exploitation of 'muslims' worldwide. Young muslims look to more radical organizations, which are less compromising about western values or issues such as Israel and US military control of the Middle East. The largest of such radical groups is, apparently, Hizb ut-Tahrir, with about 8,500 members: this is an internationalist organization originating in Palestine, but has a broad appeal for young British muslims of any descent.

In the next and final section we will consider the role of political Islam in the creation of the national lobby which sought to represent the 'muslim community' in Britain.

¹⁶ Founded by Hasan al-Banna in 1928.

¹⁷ And eventually manage to assassinate the Egyptian president Sadat in 1981.

¹⁸ In 'The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood', *Foreign Affairs*, 19 March 2007, Robert S. Leiken and Steven Brooke write that: 'The Brotherhood is a collection of national groups with differing outlooks... But all reject global jihad while embracing elections and other features of democracy.... In the past several decades, this current, along with the realities of practical politics pushed much of the Brotherhood toward moderation'.

¹⁹ Including Osama Bin Laden.

²⁰ We may speculate that the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia did not cause a split in muslims in Britain into 'Shia' and 'Sunni' because there was no united 'muslim community' to divide!

The Rushdie affair and the emergence of the Muslim Council of Britain

We have seen that by the 1980s there was no such thing as a 'muslim community' in Britain, and that the multiculturalist strategies tended to separate and alienate even more various communities from each other, by encouraging local lobbies to pursue parochial interests. At the beginning of the '80s religious (even Islamist) community leaders would simply rally their members around local issues, like the education of local girls. Despite appeals from the Tory government to create a single representative body, the muslim communities had been indeed unable to come together at all.

But in 1987 a national scandal motivated key local lobbies to come together at a national level: the publication of the notorious novel *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie.

Since the beginning, the Rushdie affair was an Islamist affair – which mobilized individuals through fundamentalist Islamist networks world-wide. In September 1988 Indian members of the fundamentalist Jamaat e-Islami contacted Manazir Ahsan, the director of the British Jamaat e-Islam's 'Islamic Foundation' in Leicester. Ahsan was proactive in spreading the word in Britain even outside his own organization, as he contacted mosques leaders or other Islamic centres and magazines across the country.

These efforts led to the creation in October 1988 of a national lobby: the UK Action for Islamic Affairs (UKACIA), with a group of middle class intellectuals, professionals and businessmen including Ahsan and university educated businessman Iqbal Sacranie (then a trustee of a mosque in Balham, southwest London) at its core.²¹ This lobby took the Rushdie affair to the national level (as well as to Têheran, stirring up the infamous fatwa).²²

Locally, the protest had a hotspot around Bradford Council of Mosques, which had been contacted by Ahsan. By then this local lobby had already acquired prestige due to its capacity to rally its community around Islamic issues and was expected to be centrally involved in the Rushdie campaign. Bradford's mosque leaders responded by writing to the prime minister about the issue. However, the protest in Bradford soon escaped the 'respectable' leaders' control. On 14 January 1989 local muslims, many of whom were radical youth, staged a public burning of the book, which quickly brought Bradford Council of Mosques and its 'community' into disrepute. Bradford's

community leaders were accused of supporting medieval views and methods, and some of them were accused (probably correctly) of sympathising with Khomeini's fatwa. Caught in the storm, Bradford Council of Mosques got eclipsed by the more middle class and respectable national lobby UKACIA. However, its priestly leaders such as Maulana²³ Sher Azam would become active members in UKACIA.

UKACIA unsuccessfully campaigned for Rushdie to be condemned under the British blasphemy law. Yet, despite its defeat, UKACIA's activity constituted a milestone for the future development of the 'muslim community'. For the first time, a rather broad national group had been created, uniting politically motivated middle class individuals as well as mosque-based leaders of local Asian communities.

In the following years, elements from UKACIA, networking with other groups across the UK, worked towards the creation of a national lobby who could confidently claim to represent 'the British muslim community': the 'Muslim Council of Britain' (MCB).

However, the divisions among the real muslim communities were such that it took nearly ten year to complete this task: the MCB was inaugurated only in 1997, the year of the historical election of New Labour to power. This was perhaps not a coincidence, and we would rather speculate that the perspective of a New Labour government catalysed and speeded up the process.

So eventually this long and troubled pregnancy was over and the MCB was born in November 1997 with the government's blessing and Iqbal Sacranie as president.

The MCB was a large umbrella group, which included more than 400 affiliates: mosque councils which represented concrete Asian communities, professional bodies which represented abstract 'communities' (such as the 'muslim dentists'), as well as more openly political organisations.

The most important of these organisations, which would have a protagonist role in the later anti-war movement, was the 'Muslim Association of Britain', (MAB). The MAB was created in the same year around a group of middle class individuals of Arab descent close to the British Muslim Brotherhood, and was interested in presenting itself as a moderate and respectable alternative to radical Islam.²⁴

With mosque organizations, representatives of 'muslim dentists' and the MAB in it, the MCB could claim to represent the 'muslim community' as a whole. So was the unity of British muslims into a great community achieved? Not at all. This unit resulted from the political campaigning and activity of a core of motivated individuals, with central elements belonging to Islamist organizations like Jamaat e-Islami or the Muslim Brotherhood. Yet however, this unity of heart and minds did not reflect any unity of real muslim communities.

This was a fundamental contradiction for the MCB: while on the one hand the MCB needed to be broad and

²¹ Iqbal Sacranie is an Asian businessman from Malawi, also a leader of the international 'Memon community'. Traditionally a mercantile community from northwest India (Pakistan), the Memons were able to create prosperous communities in south Asia and the Middle East, as well as Africa following the British empire. Memon businessmen and professionals use their original ethnic relations to maintain international connections and have recently established an official 'Memon community' organization at international level. Despite his badge as the leader of this abstract international community, Sacranie does not have roots in any established south Asian community in Britain, as he moved to Britain from Malawi in adult age.

²² On 27 October 1988 UKACIA wrote to all muslim ambassadors in London, including Mr Ahkunuzadeh Basti the Iranian charge d'affaires, who forwarded it to Tehran, eventually leading to intervention from Ayatollah Khomeini.

²³ In south Asia 'Maulanas' are religious scholars with a formal qualification, while the term 'Mullah' is often used derogatorily.

²⁴ MAB got into prominence in London by working with the British authorities in taking over London Finsbury Park Mosque and de-radicalising people within it (R. S. Leiken and S. Brooke, 'The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood', *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2007)

comprehensive in order to claim to be really representative of the 'muslim community', on the other hand it had to welcome within its umbrella members with diverse and often alien interests. Due to this contradiction, we will see that the MCB would lack unity and political direction when such a unity was politically needed: during the anti-war movement.

This contradiction was also reflected in tensions between generations and classes within the leadership of the MCB. The old guard of religious scholars in the MCB hardly recognized the authority of those younger professionals and businessmen who had initiated the national lobby, but needed their role as mediators. These professionals had the right education to speak to the New Labourite establishment, the media and the bourgeois world. While the ulemas (religious leaders) had real connections with their local communities, their language was inadequate: the multiculturalist New Labour establishment had encouraged traditional culture and language but only for strict use within their community!

On the other hand the Asian middle class, although quite reactionary, had the right outlook and above all the right political and social connections.

Yet most of these middle class individuals could claim to represent the 'muslim community' only in abstract: to this aim political Islam provides them with the appropriate ideology for the task. With its stress on the abstract unity of 'muslim',

political Islam allows individuals to present themselves as the legitimate representatives of a 'community', whether or not this 'community' coincides with any real one. In its moderate versions such as Jamaat e-Islami or the Muslim Brotherhood, then, political Islam has been instrumental to the new middle class generation in their competition for power against their old fogies, like postmodernism has been instrumental to a new generation of Labourites against the old political establishment.

Part 2 Conclusion

The new class alliances in the 1980s and the retreat of class struggle created the conditions for the formation of a 'British muslim community'. Yet this 'community' emerged paradoxically from a movement which tended to increasingly fragment the concrete muslim communities in Britain, and at the same time tended to create an abstract concept of a unified 'muslim community'. In the next and final part we will see how this 'muslim community' can exist only in a symbiotic interrelation with New Labour based on 'communalist politics'. We will also see how it was in the interest of both New Labour and the MCB to preserve this symbiotic relation during the stresses and strains of the recent events (September 11 and Islami terrorist scare, the war in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon, and the threat of new social unrest).

Part 3: 'Don't mention the war!'

The 'muslim community' and New Labour: Complementarity



Communalist politics

In Part 2 we saw that immigrants from south Asia sought to transplant and reproduce their original community relations in Britain. We also saw that, although the necessary integration within the advanced capitalist society of Britain tended to strain and fragment the Asians' direct relations, these relations still survive to a certain extent and continue to connect large

extended family groups. Individuals and families in Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi communities are still linked through mutual obligations and patron-client relations, and families are still tied by what remains of traditional moral duties and obligations, such as respect for elders. Although these connections are not as strict and binding as those in the original Asian communities, they still define 'concrete communities' which can be mobilized at a political level.

As an integral part of the process which transplanted Asian communities to Britain, immigrants from the Indian subcontinent also imported their traditional *communalist*-based politics. Communalist politics is a form which bourgeois democracy tends to assume in areas of the world where structured community relations co-exist with capitalism. In such areas, local community leaders are able to mobilize large numbers of votes for given politicians using their influence over networks of extended families. In return the local leaders receive access to privileges or public funds which they can administer or distribute to their community.

In India we can trace the existence of communalist politics back to political relations in the pre-capitalist south Asian system. In those times the basic social units were hierarchically structured economically self-sufficient villages. These units would relate to whatever high authority was in power at any time as indivisible units and, for example, would be taxed as a whole through negotiations between local leaders and representatives of the high authority. With the emergence of capitalism and the imposition of democratic forms these

traditional relations were transmuted into the form of communalist politics.

Communalist politics has found a symbiosis between traditional community relations and the democratic system, which are at least in principle incompatible. Communalist politics tends to distort the very nature of modern democracy that rests on the assumption that society is made by equal-and-free individuals, and that they can be numerically represented by an elected system.

This symbiosis is a form of class alliance which serves to control the Asian working class. The community leaders are never the poorest in the community. They are small businessmen (who can provide jobs), landlords or other 'notables' such as religious leaders. As a result they have a certain degree of personal power over the heads of the families in the community, which allows them to regulate behaviour and conduct as well as to control votes.

This power is then transmitted to the individual members of the community via patriarchal relations within each family. On the one hand each family has an interest in supporting their local leaders and their political connections. On the other hand, they depend on their community leader's discretion in distributing wealth and/or favours and feel under pressure to oblige all members in their family to be 'well behaved', i.e. respect and maintain the social and political status quo.²⁵

It is important to note that communalist politics can only sustain itself as long as the political system can guarantee material support to local leaders and their organizations, but also, importantly, as long as the community leaders can guarantee to have the power to mobilize their community at election time and maintain social peace and cohesion.²⁶

Communalist politics and the Labour Party

In Britain communalist politics involved the relations between community leaders and the British political parties at a local level, and in particular, the Labour party.

For decades the Labour party had enjoyed a special relation with Asian communities. This relation had nothing to do with old Labour's ideology or national politics, let alone its connection to the trade union movement. Simply, most Asian communities were in fact located in poor inner city areas, which were traditional strongholds for the Labour Party.²⁷

As the Asian communities grew and established themselves and as the trade union movement declined after the mid-80s, local Labour parties in many inner city areas came increasingly to depend on the communalist vote.

The election of New Labour in 1997 offered the historical occasion to allow the projection of the long-established communalist politics to the national level, but this projection necessitated the creation of a unified body which could claim to represent the 'muslim community' nationally and liaise with the new government.²⁸ In section 2 we saw how a unified body, the MCB, emerged out of a politicized middle class milieu who had previously come together around the Rushdie affair.

The MCB acted as the mediator for the 'British muslim community' and was consulted by the New Labour government on 'muslim issues'. And crucially it was recognized as a privileged advisor on funding for muslim initiatives which would benefit local 'community' organizations. On its part, once in government, New Labour began to pursue a series of what could be seen as pro-muslim policies. Thus, for example, abandoning the traditional Labour commitment to secular education, the New Labour government sanctioned the foundation of state-funded faith schools including Islamic schools. This was a vital concession to both community leaders, who saw Islamic schools as a means of preserving their communities, and Islamist leading members in the MCB who saw such schools as means of propagating Islam. The Government also provided national funding for various initiatives fostering muslim culture. Following the July bombings in London in 2005 the Government, at the behest of various muslim pressure groups including the MCB, passed legislation against religious hatred, which was promoted by New Labour's spinning machine as a sign of solidarity for the 'law abiding muslim community'.

The three poles of the national alliance

With New Labour in power and the MCB acting as advisor on 'muslim issues' the 'British muslim community' had then become a reality. But what is this unified thing that has been created? It is not simply a number of individuals, lobby groups or communities, and not simply an abstract Islamist concept either. Rather, it is a combination of all these concrete and abstract elements, based on the interrelations, interests and tensions of three socio-political poles:



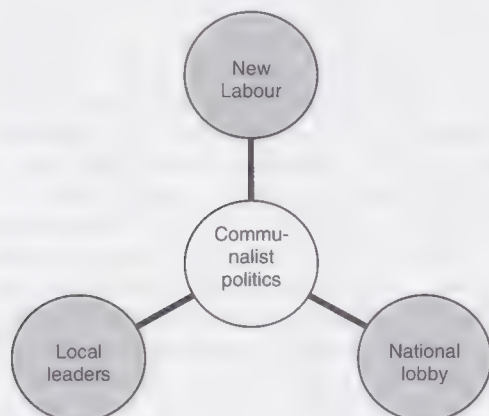
²⁵ In Aufheben #16 we criticized De Angelis's simplistic apology for human 'communities' in *The Beginning of History*. In this article we show that an analysis of the relation between the concrete muslim communities in Britain and capitalism needs more than a tautological observation that these communities are based on direct relations.

²⁶ A similar communalist politics allying the Christian Democratic Party and the Sicilian ruling class succeeded in guaranteeing more than a century of social peace in Sicily. Sicilian communalism was based on the distribution of housing and jobs, as well as on the mafia's military power. There was no ideological rationale (no 'multiculturalism') behind this alliance, but simply the combined power of welfare provisions and gunpowder. This ensured that the Sicilian 'community leaders' would have both the necessary authority and credibility.

²⁷ This of course didn't stop local leaders allying with Tory local politicians when the Conservatives were the dominant party.

²⁸ Similar national relations were created with other lobbies such as the Sikh – however, we are not dealing with these groups.

- a) the leaders of real but divided Asian communities
- b) a national lobby which claims to represent a unified but abstract British 'muslim community'
- c) the Labour Party



Communist politics is founded on the interrelations between these three poles.

In order to take advantage of a national communist relation with New Labour, local leaders need a national, unified lobby, which they were unable to create by themselves due to their material divisions. As we said earlier, they also need mediators with the right connections and political skills. Only this mediation can guarantee their access to government support and funds, which is essential for their continuing control over their local communities.

The middle class national lobby of businessmen and professionals which came together during the Rushdie affair, often politicized and connected to Islamist organisations like Jamaat e-Islami, were able to create the MCB as a unified body. Yet they still need the involvement of a myriad of divided and parochial local leaders who have the real control over concrete communities and guarantee both electoral support to New Labour and social cohesion.

The third pole of this alliance, New Labour, needs the support of the 'muslim community' (in both its abstract and concrete aspects) for its electoral success. New Labour thus needs both a national representative whom they can consult, as well as the possibility to reach particular concrete communities. In a word, the Labour party needs the interplay of the representatives of the national, abstract, community and those of the concrete communities.

The 'muslim community' and New Labour: Contradictions

We have seen so far how the elements of the political alliance of New Labour with the 'British muslim community' needed each other. However, this same alliance also contains contradictions, which would come to the fore with the 'war on terrorism' and with the anti-war movement. We will see that most of these contradictions resulted from the class nature of

this political alliance. New Labour had to juggle contrasting interests of sections of the ruling classes, as well as the discontent of the working class and the potential threat to social order from sections of it, in particular young Asians.

New Labour caught between the language of big capital and the language of political Islam

There was a clear contradiction in New Labour, between the universalism implied by its neoliberalism and proselytising of liberal democratic values abroad, and its cultural relativism, which had informed its multiculturalist policies at home.

This contradiction arose from New Labour's abandonment of social democracy and their need to seek support from sections of the ruling class with diverging interests. On the one hand New Labour's universalism reflects its close affinity with international capital and in particular the finance capital represented by the City of London. On the other hand, New Labour's multiculturalist strategies for social cohesion at home have paved the way for a national alliance of New Labour and the 'British muslim community', represented at a national level by middle class elements, often embarrassingly close to Islamist organisations.

This contradiction came to the fore following the attack on the World Trade Centre in September 2001. After this attack the Bush regime took the opportunity to forcibly re-order the oil rich regions of the wider Middle East by invading first Afghanistan and then Iraq. This was justified in terms of bringing the universal values of 'freedom' and 'democracy' to this 'backward' region of the world. In what became known as the 'global war on terror' Islamic 'fundamentalism' now replaced communism as the principal enemy of western 'freedom and democracy. For the political Islamists, Bush's 'global war on terror', and his invasion of the 'muslim countries' of Afghanistan and Iraq, was a barely disguised attack on Islam itself. The interests of British capital required that British foreign policy should support the US. Yet this sat uneasily with New Labour's domestic social policy of multiculturalism, particularly its alignment with the 'British muslim community'.

Later we consider how New Labour sought to navigate this ideological contradiction. But first we must look at how the 'global war on terror' impacted on the 'British muslim community' itself.

The conflict in the Middle East and the conflicts in the MCB

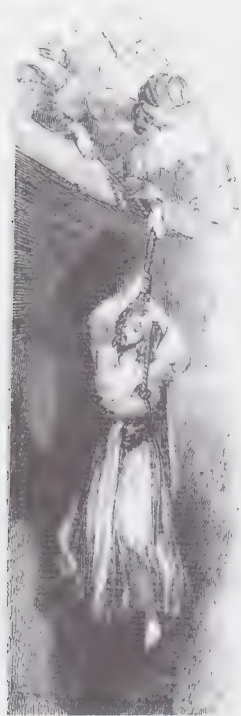
The 'war on terror' would also bring to the fore the inherent contradictions in the MCB, and in the 'British muslim community' which it represented. We have seen that the MCB reflected the unity in opposition of concrete local communities, divided along ethnic lines, and whose division was encouraged by the material gains offered by various multiculturalist policies. This division had been overcome through an abstract unification offered by the ideology of political Islam – the unity of muslims as just abstractly 'muslims', irrespective of their belonging to families or local groups originating from different places with different languages and cultures, or of their real differing material and class interests.

In some respect the 'war on terror' was a blessing for the Islamist groups who had recently emerged as political protagonists. The Muslim Brotherhood-inspired MAB, which did not suffer from the inherent divisions of the MCB, eagerly joined the anti-war movement and the national Stop the War Coalition. Later, even the MCB supported the anti-war demonstrations. The Islamist interpretation that the war was an attack on Islam, and hence on all muslims, which had to be opposed by the 'muslim community' constituted a powerful ideological tool for the mobilization of millions of muslim individuals across the country.

The large anti-war demonstrations offered the tangible manifestation of what so far had been a purely conceptual entity – the 'British muslim community' was there en masse, it was visible, it marched in the street and shouted at Downing Street! In order to actually achieve this mobilization, MAB and other Islamist leaders had to face, and practically overcome, the parochial separations and traditional reciprocal hostility of various concrete communities across the country. This work and its result strengthened the position and prestige of middle class Islamist leaders.

However, this mobilization was connected with the abstract aspect of the 'British muslim community'. We have seen in the previous section that the existence of this unified 'community' was based on the interplay of ideological and material aspects: economic gains and a national electoral alliance with the New Labour government. This made both community and national muslim leaders be very careful about opposing New Labour and even the war.

We will see in the next sections how this contradiction unfolded and how it explains why Respect failed to gain a political advantage from the anti-war movement.



Muslim youth and Islamic radicalism

The balance of opposition and unity in the communalist alliance of New Labour and the 'muslim community' in Britain, the fact that the multiculturalist strategies served to break down class struggle, and the fact that the anti-war movement did not lead to any political alternative seems to suggest that the British ruling class has found the secret to reaching an almost Hegelian synthesis of its contradictions. This is in fact untrue: like all alliances among sections of the ruling class, this one also does not abolish the antagonism of the proletariat – whose needs and demands necessarily contradicts any established equilibrium.

As we have seen, fundamental for the communalist relation of MCB and New Labour was the capacity of community leaders to both mobilize their community at election time, and guarantee some degree of social control. Yet with the progressive integration of British-born Asians into British capitalist society, the community leaders' ability to deliver on this guarantee is steadily declining.

The promoters of this alliance sincerely believed that providing funds for religious and cultural demands would serve to pacify and satisfy the 'ethnic minority' and gain their loyalty, and community leaders counted on the power of traditional patriarchal respect and religion on individuals for re-imposing order. However, while state funds were diverted from the working class into the hands of local rulers and mosques, the working class within the Asian communities clearly saw through the vacuity of multiculturalist and communitarian practices. Lacking housing and decent income many Asians continued to be antagonistic to the state, the local authorities and, last but not least, the police.

In particular, the young generation increasingly resented the special relations between their community leaders and local authorities, which clearly appeared alien to their interests. As we said earlier, due to the creeping atomization of their relations with their own community, these young people did not feel bound to duties or allegiances to their elders, let alone their old priests or local leaders. As a result, community leaders and the patriarchal family increased their moral power over young individuals.

As we will mention briefly below, social unrest among young Asians continued through the 1990s and 2000s, and increasingly took the form of 'race' conflict between young gangs. The riots in Oldham (Great Manchester, May 2001), Leeds, Burnley, Bradford (June) and again Bradford, Stoke-on-Trent (July), were sparked by clashes between white and Asian gangs, stirred up by local election campaigns by the BNP. After the riots of 2001, in the Ritchie Report we read:

Police links with minority ethnic communities are at present based on a network of community leaders who in our view lack authority and credibility (p. 13).

The fact that the community leaders appeared to lack the power and credibility to maintain social order was an alarming factor for the stability of the communalist alliance. In response to these riots, the government started distancing themselves from their old 'multiculturalist' approach: in December 2001 Blunkett initiated a 'debate about citizenship' which would

eventually lead to the introduction of a 'citizenship test' for obtaining a UK passport and blamed 'shockingly divided communities' for the riots.²⁹

But besides riots and street fights the capacity of community leaders to maintain authority and control was challenged by the success of radical Islam among young people. In response to frustration and out of resentment with their elders who seem to compromise with the establishment, young Asian people looked with growing interest to radical Islam. Thousands joined groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir, girls took up the full veil, boys adopted extreme sexist and conservative views – outdoing the authority and patriarchy of their own parents and thus defusing their power on their same terrain.

The inability of community leaders to prevent the diffusion of radical Islamist ideas was exacerbated by the 'war on terror'. The political Islamist propaganda of middle class leaders of MAB and MCB, which they needed to promote themselves and to mobilize the 'muslim community', only served to legitimize similar Islamist ideas of more radical groups which only seemed to take the moderate positions of the Muslim Brothers or Jamaat e-Islam to their logical conclusion and coherently opposed, without the rather pathetic weaknesses or embarrassing compromises, New Labour and its aggressive foreign policy.

The 'war on terror' and the events that followed would reveal that the threat of radical Islam was not at all a threat to the bourgeois system: rather it was a threat to the credibility of MCB and the stability of its alliance with New Labour.

The war and the veil



Not in the name of the 'British muslim community'?

After the shock of the riots in May-July 2001, 'muslim Britain' would have to face its biggest public relations problem ever. In September 2001 a small band of radical Islamists from Saudi Arabia, connected to Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaida, managed to destroy the World Trade Centre in New York. There had been many Islamist bombings around the world, but this attack was given a special significance by the US government: the

western world was not safe, Islamic terrorists could hit *the US*. The 'war or terror' began, with US-led invasions first of Afghanistan and then Iraq, ideologically propped up by a never ending series of commemorations for the victims of the 11th of September. The dead in the towers' rubble would only be the first of a large number: they would be followed by the innocent victims of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Although the geo-strategical reason for the war was obvious, George Bush claimed that this war was 'a clash of civilizations', between the democratic western world against the uncivilized Islamic threat, and even called it a 'crusade'. Ironically, Bush's words would be perfectly approved by those proclaiming to represent the opposed 'civilization': political Islam. By presenting the attack on the Middle East as an attack 'on Islam' political Islamists around the world sought to rally muslim populations against the west and pro-US governments.

However, creating a 'British muslim' movement against the war was not so easy for the MCB, which had concrete divisions and interests. The leaders of the MCB were split between the Islamist call and the need to save their special relations with New Labour: it was in the interests of the 'muslim community' to play a moderate, pro-government card.

Things were not easy for New Labour as well. Although Blair was desperate in following Bush to Afghanistan and interested in exploiting the 'terrorism scare' to justify this war, he could not adopt Bush's ideological 'clash of civilization' call – or risk a disaster for the government's relations with the 'British muslim community'.

Immediately after September 11, then, both the British government and the MCB had common interests in defusing serious political conflicts around the issue of the 'muslim community', and to oppose both political Islam and the suggestion that 'all muslims' were a threat to civilization. On its part the MCB made every effort to reassure the government that the 'muslim community' was moderate and rejected terrorism, while the government reassured the MCB that the invasion of Afghanistan was not against Islam (and muslims) but against Bin Laden.³⁰

However, these efforts did not solve the inevitable problem – Blair had an interest in attacking Afghanistan, while within the MCB opposition to the war remained. Although the MCB was not interested in a full-frontal confrontation with the government and even refused to support the first anti-war march, the MCB leaders eventually came together and signed a letter which asked the government to avoid a war in Afghanistan and seek diplomatic responses to the September 11 attack. Going a bit further, a council of religious representatives within the MCB issued a fatwa which declared the bombing of Afghanistan unlawful. In response, Blair apparently stopped returning the MCB's calls in a group.

When it was clear that despite his friendship and trust for the 'British muslim community' in Britain Blair would attack the muslims of Afghanistan, a serious split threatened the MCB and eventually the MCB had to support the anti-war movement and endorse the following demonstrations. Yet Blair continued to keep his phone off the hook and preferred to relate to his

²⁹ news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/1703322.stm

³⁰ 'Lobbying and Marching' by J. Birt in *Muslim Britain: Community under Pressure*, edited by T. Abbas, Zed Books, 2005.

New Labourite muslim MPs. Worrying for their careers (and their privileged positions in their communities) all the MPs except one signed a paper approving an attack on Afghanistan. Later, however, they disowned it.

In 2002, the StWC involved the proactive MAB in sponsoring a demonstration for Palestine. Subsequently, the MAB got actively and enthusiastically involved in the anti-war movement during the years 2002-3 and was at the front of the massive demonstrations against the attack on Iraq. It also formally joined the Coalition in 2002. In contrast with the teetering MCB, the smaller and more homogeneous MAB showed to have a stronger political line; however, this coherent politics was possible because the MAB was a small and politically defined organisation – and for this reason it could not claim to represent ‘the muslim community’.

The anti-war movement had reached its apogee on the eve of the invasion of Iraq, when, on 15 February 2003, two million people marched in London against the war. However, already by the end of April the war was over and the movement went into sharp decline eventually leaving little more than the leftwing rump. The MAB retreated from the front of increasingly shrinking demonstrations while the ‘muslim community’ returned to the protective communalist wing of New Labour.

In May 2005 New Labour was re-elected to power with the aid of the muslim vote; and, as a cherry on the communalist cake, in June 2005, Mister MCB, Iqbal Sacranie, was knighted for ‘services to the muslim community, to charities and to community relations’. With a fanfare of royal celebrations peace was again made between the New Labour establishment and the ‘British muslim community’.



Put your house in order

However, new problems lurked ahead. Despite introducing increasingly tight police measures and implementing a long series of increasingly draconian Anti-Terrorism laws, the government had continued targeting the wrong people. Searches were made in asylum seekers’ homes, and people

were charged with immigration offences or accused of using their grandma’s favourite laxative, ricinoleic oil³¹, to make ‘ricin bombs’. At the same time, the Anti-Terrorism Act was used to threaten and arrest liberal peace campaigners, and the ‘terrorism scare’ was exploited to introduce a new computerized system for state control, the ‘Identity Card’.

In the face of all these ‘anti-terror’ efforts, on July 7 2005 Britain had its own mini-version of September 11. A small group of rather amateurish young Islamists planned to blow themselves up on the London underground system and succeeded in blowing up three trains and a bus, causing 52 deaths. Immediately, revelations came out that three of them were British of Pakistani descent born in Leeds or Bradford. One was a Jamaican immigrant, who had recently converted to Islam through his contacts with young native Asians. As if this was not enough, two weeks later another group of young British muslims was involved in a follow up terrorist attack which, this time, failed miserably. There were more muslim young people spread throughout Britain, who were plotting suicide attacks! This revelation shook the assumptions on which the MCB and the government had collaborated – that the terrorist threat was from abroad, and that the ‘muslim community’ was able to contain its children. One of the material foundations of communalist politics was crumbling.

Up until then the government had centred their counter-terrorism operations on refugees from muslim countries, most of whom had little connections with the long established muslim communities in Britain. At the beginning of August 2005, in a speech presented as historical, Blair stated that ‘the rules of the game had changed’. Although Blair stressed that the ‘muslim community’ had been *and still was* the government’s partner in dealing with terrorism, he said that the government now planned to extend measures like ‘control orders’ which were previously limited to foreign national suspected of terrorism, so that they could be applied to British people.

Yet the extension of police powers, and the targeting of ‘home grown terrorists’ to combat terrorism threatened to alienate established muslim communities. As a consequence, the Government stressed the need for a partnership with the ‘law-abiding British muslim community’ to counter the spread of extremist political Islamic ideas amongst young muslims. In October 2005 the government launched a consultation called ‘Preventing Extremism Together’, which was concerned with the problem of confronting radicalism among the youth.³² One of the outcomes of this consultation was the creation of the ‘Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board’, in June 2006, with the MCB onboard. This body was expected to supervise the activity of Mosques in Britain and fight pockets of radical propaganda.

In return for the co-operation of ‘the muslim community’, and to counter the rise of anti-muslim feeling generated by the July bombings, the government introduced new legislation. On February 16th 2006 the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill

³¹ i.e. castor oil

³² <http://www.communities.gov.uk/archived/general-content/communities/preventingextremismtogether/>

received royal assent. It seemed that peace had been restored between New Labour and the British 'muslim community'.

While Islamic terrorism was unable to threaten the renewed peace between the government and 'the muslim community', new controversy was stirred up in the Summer of 2006 by a massacre of a different nature. On July 12 Israel invaded Lebanon in an effort to drive Hezbollah from southern Lebanon. Yet Israel's hopes of a quick victory in a matter of days were soon dashed. As the Israeli army struggled to make headway against the stubborn resistance of Hezbollah's forces, Bush and Blair procrastinated about calling a ceasefire. While shootings and bombings continued for days, it became clear that Bush and Blair had been complicit in Israel's attack on Lebanon and were waiting for Israel to achieve its military objectives before calling for a ceasefire.

Blair's pro-Israeli stance was another test for New Labour's Islamist allies in the MCB. The procrastination of Bush and Blair in calling for a ceasefire while Lebanese villages were being destroyed by Israeli warplanes was widely condemned and briefly revived the anti-war movement. Pressure from the anti-war movement was stepped up on Blair to fulfil previous promises to leave office.

Pushed into a corner by criticisms and expecting an Islamist backlash, the government decided to make a concerted effort – to put pressure on the moderate 'muslim community' and oblige them to take a position, once and for all, against radical Islam. In September 2006 Home Secretary John Reid urged muslim parents to watch out for signs of extremism in their children. Shortly after, in October 2006, in an article for a local newspaper, government minister Jack Straw wrote that he preferred that muslim women who came to his surgeries removed their veils so he could see their faces when he was talking to them.

In support of Straw, Tony Blair said that the full veil was a 'mark of separation', Gordon Brown added that that 'it would be better for Britain if fewer muslim women wore veils', and Harriet Harman said that she 'wanted the veil abolished'. The New Labourite choir received unanimous ovations from the tabloids and the BNP.

The government's message was clear: the 'muslim community' had to guarantee to draw a line between good and moderate Islam and radical Islam and take a distance from it, and that it was able to set their 'own house in order'. As never before, the government appeared to take a firm position regarding the assimilation of 'the muslim community'.

With the message came also the threat: to dump the MCB and replace it. Yet with what? We have seen that the 'British muslim community' was a construct, resulting from the interplay of interests of various political and community groups and New Labourite politicians. Outside this construct there were divided communities or simply individuals. Nevertheless the government went for the bluff and promoted a new national group: the 'Sufi Muslim Council'. Launched at the Houses of Parliament in July, the Sufi Muslim Council was rapidly brought to prominence following the end of the Lebanon war – its leader Haras Rafiq was allowed star appearances on TV news programmes and Newsnight and his group was presented

as a credible representative of the 'Moderate British muslim community'.³³

But it was far too easy for the supporters of the MCB to find holes in the Sufi group. It was immediately found that Rafiq was a young businessman with no background in lobbying or community work. Worse, Rafiq had close relations with members of the Labour Friends of Israel, and his spiritual inspiration came from the US-based Islamic Supreme Council of America, whose leader, Sheik Hisham Kabanni, was very close to the neo-conservative government and an apologist for the Israel occupation.³⁴ If common muslims might not feel 'represented' by a lobby like the MCB because of its Islamist inspirations, they would even less feel represented by a bunch of Israeli apologists!

At any rate, by Christmas all tensions were over again. The Israeli army had been defeated by Hezbollah and had retreated. Blair announced that he would resign. And the 'British muslim community' returned back to ranks. Peace was made again and, as soon as the old allies of New Labour appeared willing to collaborate, the Sufi group vanished to thin air – from whence it had come.

Respect and Islamophobia

The anti-war movement offered exciting times to the SWP (SWP), the biggest Trotskyist group in Britain.³⁵ The SWP was central in setting up the Stop the War Coalition and controlling its workings. The anti-war demonstrations in 2003, with millions on the streets, made them daydream to be at the lead of a new political movement, a large front involving the millions of muslims who had been willing to protest.



³³ Sufism is a mystical interpretation of Islam which sees religion as a private and apolitical issue. The Sufi Council of Britain claimed that up to 80% of Britain's two million muslims come from the Sufi tradition (only because most muslims are apolitical!). This claim was attacked by other muslim groups.

³⁴ In 1999 Kabanni gave a clandestine testimony to the US State Department in which he claimed that 80% of mosque in the US were 'extremist', and that the Israeli occupation was legitimate.

³⁵ It is however a minor party, with about 2,000 members.

Dumping the Socialist Alliance, which had attempted to unite various far left groups, the SWP entered negotiations with the central Birmingham Mosque and the prominent green journalist and campaigner George Monbiot to create a broad popular front to be known as the Peace and Justice Coalition. It was hoped that this Peace and Justice Coalition would draw in both the Green party as well as the MAB to give electoral expression to the anti-war movement. However, both the MAB and the Green Party refused to join. Unrepentant, the SWP did not abandon the idea of a broad popular anti-war front and at the beginning of 2004 it succeeded in bringing together a number of extremely small left-wing parties, some individual community leaders who had been involved in the anti-war movement from areas like Tower Hamlets and Birmingham, and anti-war star and martyr George Galloway MP, who had been expelled from the Labour Party for his opposition to the war in Iraq. A new party, Respect, was born, with George Galloway as its figure head.

For the SWP the aim was clear – to have a large front with ‘the muslims’, which, the SWP simplistically assumed, coincided with Islamist leaders. Yet in order to have a front with the Islamist world the SWP needed to abandon its traditional lefty line on a number of issues which would create controversy among their prospective allies: gay rights, sexual equality, even their simplistic ‘teach yourself Marxism’ went out the window. In exchange, the SWP members were asked to ‘teach themselves political Islam’: first of all, the idea that the wars in the Middle East were anti-muslim crusades.³⁶

SWP theorists were called to re-think their criticism of political Islam, which they loyally did despite the intellectual embarrassment caused by having to contradict their own writings. Chris Harman had to revise his evaluation of political Islam, which he had presented in ‘The Prophet and the Proletariat’. In that pamphlet Harman concluded that, although one needs to understand why Islamist groups gain support from the proletariat, the left cannot ally with them. In a memorable conference of the academic Marxist journal *Historical Materialism* in December 2006, Harman explained why the left *can* ally with political Islam (or at least with *some, progressive*, Islamists like Hezbollah).

Having embraced the creed of political Islam, the SWP assumed as theirs the view that any political attack against Islamist organizations or regimes was an attack against ‘muslims’ – so racism tout court. The SWP was happy to silence criticism of social repression out carried on workers, women, students and gay organizations in countries like Iraq and Iran. Those who dared to speak out were accused of being ‘anti-Islam racists’.³⁷ Later, ‘Hands Off the People of Iran’, a

leftwing organization which opposed both US imperialism and the regime of Teheran would be banned from the StWC. Instead, representatives of al-Sadr’s power circle were invited to London and given a platform at StWC’s rallies.

A frenzy of activity was imposed on the SWP’s foot soldiers, they were asked to leaflet mosques and create alliances on campuses with Islamic youth groups. This activity reached its hysterical peak when in 2006 the government appeared to take a harder position on radical Islam. The StWC used the government’s threats to the MCB to accuse New Labour of ‘Islamophobia’ and call for a national conference.

Yet after all this activity and long canvassing, the SWP was not able to lure many muslims into their front. In Brighton we observed with amusement that the SWP’s mosque leafleting was totally unsuccessful: the most politically motivated Islamists would see a socialist party as an enemy, while moderate ‘community leaders’ and mullahs would rather not be involved in political activity at all; and were probably embarrassed by the StWC’s enthusiasm about Islamism.³⁸

At the national level, already by the time Respect was set up, the main organizations of muslim Britain had turned away from the anti-war movement. The more active MAB, which had joined the anti-war movement and the StWC, showed not to be interested in Respect, and did not support its own ex-president Anas al-Tikriti when he stood as a Respect candidate in the European elections of 2004.³⁹ Eventually only a pro-Respect splinter from MAB, the ‘British muslim Initiative’ led by al-Tikriti, continued to support increasingly shrinking StWC demonstrations.

Unsurprisingly, in all its life span until the bitter split of 2007, Respect was not able to get more than twenty councillors, twelve of them in Tower Hamlets and had only one MP – Galloway.⁴⁰

So what had gone wrong? Although it was willing to oppose New Labour and its politics, the SWP could not see the concrete basis on which New Labour had founded its electoral support in muslim Britain. More idealistic than New Labour, the SWP had taken the concept of ‘muslim community’ for granted, they had accepted the Islamist ideology which presented the ‘muslim community’ as unified by Islam, and expected that pure ideological outrage against the war ‘on Islam’ would turn all ‘muslims’ away from New Labour.

It is true that such ideological views were a fundamental part in the electoral alliance between New Labour and the MCB – however, we have seen that both New Labour and the MCB had been painfully clear about the contradicting material aspects of their alliance. And above all on the need to fund this

³⁶ By packing a meeting in 2006 the SWP obliged Brighton’s Sussex Action for Peace to approve by vote a Declaration on Islamophobia, which described the recent wars in the Middle East as wars ‘on muslims’. Challenged by other participants, the SWP members insisted that these wars were motivated by ‘anti-muslim racism’.

³⁷ During the national NUS conference in 2006 the SWP organized a boycott of a speech by Houzan Mahmoud, the representative abroad of the ‘Organizations of Women’s Freedom in Iraq’ who was to speak about attacks on workers and feminists in Iraq by Islamist forces like al-Sadr’s Mahdi army.

³⁸ After months leafleting at the three or four local mosques, the Brighton members of the SWP have so far not been able to get *one* Asian individual to their meetings. In 2007, after a long search, they were able to find one mullah from Worthing who agreed to speak at a Sussex Action for Peace public meeting. When this man came, we discovered why – he was a hippy-looking white British man, who had been converted to Islam by his wife from the Far East, and who could share western and liberal views with the SWP.

³⁹ Ergo he was not elected.

⁴⁰ George Galloway’s old seat in Glasgow was abolished due to boundary changes. At the 2005 general election he stood in Tower Hamlets and defeated the sitting New Labour MP Oona King.

alliance on the material provision of funds and resources which Respect could not hope to promise to community leaders! While it is *not on bread alone that shall man live*, man definitely votes for those who have bread, and this was New Labour.

While the 'muslim community' voted almost unanimously for New Labour, Respect only received the votes of Galloway's faithful constituents. The exceptional muslim votes came from odd pockets like Tower Hamlets, which, for historical reasons, had not been able to develop a structured local community which could enter into a multiculturalist and communalist alliance with New Labour.⁴¹

However, where Respect won muslim votes they were gained through the same communalist politics which their idealistic and simplistic approach prevented them from critically identify as a mechanism of class domination. As the *Weekly Worker* revealed, Respect candidates in Birmingham were owners of shops and flats of entire streets and could gain electoral support from their tenants because of the blackmail of property relations. Not only did the SWP compromise with homophobic Islamists – it also endorsed a class politics which exploited the power of the petit bourgeoisie over the working class within the muslim communities.

Despite the SWP's idealism, the greedy and petit bourgeois foundations of their politics gave them the final backlash. When the anti-war movement declined and the SWP split up from Galloway, most Respect councillors preferred to follow Galloway. Only four out of twelve in Tower Hamlets remained on the SWP's side, but within months, three defected to the Labour party and one to the Tories. *That's where the bread was.*

Croissants and roses: A conclusion

At the time of writing (Autumn 2008) it is more than seven years since the launching of the 'global war on terror' following the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York. It is also more than five years since the huge anti-war demonstrations on the eve of the invasion of Iraq, which mobilized the 'British muslim community' to march against New Labour's foreign policy. As we have seen, in the intervening years the anti-war movement has declined and the tensions between New Labour and the 'British muslim community' have subsided. Now even the SWP has at long last seen that the attempt to win over the muslim vote over the issue of the war has been a dead end; and in order to extricate themselves the SWP has had to provoke a rather acrimonious split in Respect.

⁴¹ The reasons are not totally known to us – it was perhaps because Tower Hamlets had been traditionally left out of the 'muslim' network which referred to the MCB. Many of the muslims in Tower Hamlets were Bangladeshi people, among the most disadvantaged of British Asians. The borough is also partly inhabited by new refugees with no established family links. Tower Hamlets locals related in small community groups, including liberal social centres, and were 'represented' by strong mosques or other organizations interested in linking up with New Labour.

So what now for New Labour and the 'British muslim community'? A little more than a year ago all seemed to be well for New Labour. Tony Blair, who had come to personify the disastrous invasion of Iraq, had at long last gone. Under their new leader they could now move on from the splits and divisions that had arisen from the war in Iraq. Not only had peace been more or less restored with the 'British muslim community', but more generally New Labour could bask in their achievements of the past ten years in creating their new Britain. All but the most extreme in the bourgeois political spectrum were now essentially New Labour. The old Labour left had been unable even to muster enough nominations to get on the ballot paper and Brown had been elected leader of the Labour party unopposed. At the same time, the Conservative party under the new leadership of Blair clone David Cameron now claimed to be more 'New Labour' than the Labour party.

Yet their moment of triumph under Brown was not to last long. The success of New Labour had ultimately depended on the long economic upswing. This had allowed them to pursue pro-business policies and low taxes for the middle classes at the same time as substantially increasing public spending on health and education. Now that, in the words of Mervyn King Governor of the Bank of England, the 'NICE' decade is over for the British economy, the New Labour electoral base is breaking up. Over the past year the large-scale desertion of its long neglected traditional working class supporters has shocked the Labour Party. For the first time in more than a decade there would seem to be a real possibility of a Tory government.

Under Cameron, the leadership of the Conservative party has accepted the ruling consensus of a 'new diverse, meritocratic and multicultural Britain' established by New Labour – although this acceptance will have to be tempered by its need to mollify its die-hard Thatcherite activist base. Indeed, Cameron is perhaps more committed to communitarianism than New Labour has been; seeing it as a means to reduce the role of the state by harnessing voluntary community and religious organisations. As a consequence, a Conservative government is likely to be well disposed towards building alliances with the MCB, and it is highly likely that the businessmen and professionals of the abstract national muslim community will not be adverse to transferring their affections to the Tories.

The multiculturalist strategies that have served to sustain divisions within the working class are likely to continue under a Conservative government. But as we have seen, the emergence of the 'British muslim community' depended not only on state-sponsored multiculturalist policies but also on the rise of political Islam. As the war passes into history will political Islam still be able to hold together the diverse Asian communities? And perhaps more importantly will the ideology of political Islam still be able to maintain its hold over the more militant sections of the young Asian working class? This all remains to be seen.

Al-Sadr and the Mahdi army: Sectarianism and resistance in Iraq



Introduction

Largely unknown before the fall of Saddam Hussein, Muqtada al-Sadr has risen to become a major figure in Iraq over the past five years. Certainly, Muqtada al-Sadr has become something of a *bête noir* for the American authorities, and contrawise, he has become something of a hero for many in the anti-war movement. Yet Muqtada al-Sadr remains a rather enigmatic figure. Patrick Cockburn's new book *Muqtada al-Sadr and the Fall of Iraq* (Faber & Faber, 2008) promises to shed light on who Muqtada al-Sadr is and the nature of his Sadrist movement. This book has been vigorously promoted by both the Stop the War Coalition and the SWP. So what does Cockburn tell us about Muqtada al-Sadr and his movement and why has it gained such enthusiastic backing from the leaders of the official anti-war movement?

Patrick Cockburn has a well earned reputation as an intrepid investigative journalist. Unlike many of his colleagues, who have preferred to write up the official briefings and press releases from the coalition's PR departments in the relative safety and comfort of the Green Zone, Patrick Cockburn has repeatedly had the courage to venture out to find eye-witness accounts and testimonies of those actually involved in what has been happening during the occupation of Iraq. In doing so Cockburn has often had to risk his own life, and has seen many of his friends and contacts murdered. This courageous investigative journalism, combined with both his long experience of reporting on Iraq - which dates back to the late 1970s - and his trenchant opposition to the occupation, has meant that Cockburn has provided a vital alternative source of information for opponents of both the war and the subsequent occupation of Iraq.¹ As a consequence, at least for the British anti-war

movement, Patrick Cockburn's views on Iraq carry considerable weight.

In this book Cockburn aims to refute the common characterisation of Muqtada Al-Sadr as a 'maverick', 'rabble-rousing' and 'firebrand' cleric, which has been promoted by both the mainstream Western press and many of Al-Sadr's opponents in Iraq. Against what he sees as this false characterisation, Cockburn presents Muqtada Al-Sadr as an 'astute' and 'cautious' politician committed to national unity. Muqtada Al-Sadr, we are told, has shown himself to be a skilful and intelligent leader of a mass, if rather 'anarchic', political movement, which has consistently opposed both Saddam Hussein's regime and the subsequent US occupation. In developing this argument Cockburn has drawn on his own extensive experience of reporting on Iraq and conducted numerous interviews with Muqtada Al-Sadr himself, Al-Sadr's supporters and many of his opponents, particularly amongst rival Shia parties.

However, intrepid anti-war reporting is one thing; to go beyond the competing ideological interpretations of immediate events to uncover the true nature of the contending political forces in Iraq is quite another. As we shall have cause to point out, a critical reading of the extensive evidence presented in Cockburn's book serves to refute his own sympathetic characterisation of Muqtada Al-Sadr and the Sadrist movement, just as much as it serves to refute the antipathetic characterisations put forward by Sadr's American and Iraqi opponents!

But perhaps a far more serious fault of this book, and one that is particularly insidious, is that Cockburn unquestioningly accepts the fundamental notion, shared by the both Al-Sadr and most of his opponents, that the Iraq is primarily divided along sectarian and ethnic grounds; and that furthermore the bitter conflicts that have arisen in Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein are to be understood as essentially the continuation of the age old struggle of the long oppressed Iraqi Kurds and Shia against their domination by the Sunni Arab minority. This specious and ideological notion has been vigorously promoted by Kurdish Nationalist Parties (the KDP and KUP) and by the rival sectarian Shia Parties that make up United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), which together now dominate the Iraqi government.

But it is a notion that has also been adopted by the American foreign policy establishment in justifying the occupation. In order to justify their acceptance of an Iraqi government filled with the pro-Iranian Shia parties of the UIA, the Americans have come to argue that the occupation has not simply liberated Iraq but that in doing so it has liberated the 'long oppressed Shia majority from Sunni tyranny'.² Indeed, For all of his criticisms of the American

book on the US occupation of Iraq: *The Occupation: War and Resistance in Iraq*, Verso, 2006.

² Under the guidance of these nationalist and Shia politicians, the US had from the very beginning of the occupation seen Iraqi society as being divided primarily along ethnic and sectarian lines. To ensure 'ethnic and sectarian balance' the Americans appointed those who claimed to 'represent' these various sectarian and ethnic groups. Thus from the very outset it can be argued that the Americans had both promoted and institutionalised ethnic and sectarian divisions.

¹ Cockburn has written extensively on Iraq. Besides numerous articles and reports on Iraq for the *Independent* and has also written a

invasion and occupation of Iraq, Cockburn essentially concurs with the Americans that the fall of Saddam Hussein has meant that the time of the 'long oppressed Iraqi Shia' has finally come. Where Cockburn disagrees with the Americans is who it is that truly represents the 'long oppressed Iraqi Shia'. For the Americans it is the English speaking dark suited politicians, which had for decades opposed Saddam Hussein from exile; for Cockburn it is Muqtada Al-Sadr, with his mass support amongst the most dispossessed Shia in Iraq.

At first sight it might seem that what he euphemistically terms the puritanism of Muqtada al-Sadr and his supporters would be repellent to liberal leftists like Cockburn, and indeed to much of his audience. The Sadrist movement has long been committed to the imposition of a draconian interpretation of Sharia Law. In the 1990s, with the tacit approval of Saddam Hussein, Muqtada Al-Sadr's father ran Sharia courts from his Baghdad headquarters that meted out severe punishments, including executions, to ungodly gays and wayward women.³ Under the occupation these Sharia courts have multiplied. As the Sadrist and the other political Islamic groups have attempted to impose their strict interpretation of Sharia Law on what, at least in urban areas, is a largely secular and westernized society, punishments such as floggings, stonings and beheadings have become widespread. Women have particularly suffered from this imposition of Sharia Law. According to the Organisation for Women's Freedom in Iraq the number of women killed by political Islamic organisations, such as the Sadrists, now amounts to 'a genocide against women'.



However, at first, the US could still envisage that such divisions would be contained and transcended within a pliant pro-western secular state. However, in 2004, faced with insurrections across Iraq, the US did its deal with Sistani, dividing the resistance along sectarian grounds and opening the way for the sectarian parties of the UIA to sweep the elections in 2005. As a consequence, US propagandists have adopted the ideology of the UIA that they represent the long oppressed Shia of Iraq.

³ See, 'Baghdad Gays Fear for Their Lives' in *Iraqi Crisis Report*, In Institute for war & peace reporting. www.iwpr.net/?p=icr&s=f&o=324756&apc_state=henh

The situation in Basra is a prime example. Since the withdraw of British troops from Basra in September 2007, and the consequent take over of large parts of Basra by Muqtada Al-Sadr's Mahdi army, the mutilated bodies of more than a hundred women are being found dumped on the cities streets every month.⁴

Yet the atrocities committed by the Sadrists are not confined to the draconian imposition of Sharia Law. The Mahdi army has played a major part in sectarian conflict. The Mahdi army was a prime protagonist in what Cockburn himself has called the 'cruel and bloody civil war' that erupted in Baghdad following the bombing of the Samara mosque in February 2006. The Mahdi army pursued a ruthless policy of sectarian cleansing in areas of the city they took over, which involved the brutal murder of thousands of those deemed to be Sunni and terrorized thousands more to flee.

Patrick Cockburn, perhaps wary of the feminist sensitivities of many of his readers, is a little shy concerning the Sadrists repressive implementation of Sharia Law. He readily admits that the Sadrists have enforced the wearing of the veil in the areas they control. Indeed, he recounts how families he knows have been threatened with violence by the Mahdi army if they did not make their women wear the hijab. Yet he tries to play this down by alleging that most women, at least in southern Iraq, wore the veil anyway.⁵ Cockburn claims that the Sadrists attitude to women is better than the Taliban. The Sadrists', he tells us, stand for the 'separation of men and women rather than the total subjection of women like the Taliban in Afghanistan'.⁶ Cockburn completely ignores the severe punishments meted out, particularly to women, by the Sadrists. In fact he swallows whole the claims of his Sadrist interviewees that, as regards to women, the Sadrist courts merely 'heard women's complaints and asserted their rights, particularly in matters of divorce and child custody'.⁷

However, although he seeks to play down and avoid the reactionary and repressive character of the Sadrist movement, particularly in regard to women, Cockburn does not seek to deny the Mahdi army's involvement in sectarian killings; indeed, he provides ample evidence for it. In the very first chapter, after relating how he was nearly killed at a Mahdi army checkpoint, only being saved by the quick thinking of his driver and his Irish passport, he tells us how:

Iraqis began to carry two sets of identity papers, one showing they were Sunni and the other that they were Shia. Faked papers avoided identifiably Sunni names such as 'Omar' or Othman'. Shia checkpoints started carrying out theological examinations to see if a person with Shia papers was truly familiar with Shia ritual and was not a Sunni in disguise. Many of these dangerous young men manning these checkpoints came from Sadr City and belonged, or claimed to belong to, the Mahdi army.⁸

⁴ See 'Joint Statement to Stop "Gender Cleansing" in Iraq, Iraq Freedom Congress, www.ifcongress.com/English/index.htm

⁵ p. 216.

⁶ p. 216. Of course this defence of gender apartheid is similar to the defence of racial apartheid by white South Africans.

⁷ p. 216.

⁸ p. 14.

Later on in his book Cockburn vividly describes the terror instilled in the 'Sunnis' of Baghdad by the death squads of the Mahdi army during the sectarian cleansing of 2006. What is more Cockburn provides what he himself describes as 'a convincing account' of the operations of the Sadrist death squads during this period by a former Mahdi army member and self-confessed death squad leader Abu Kamael:

On the overall objective of the campaign [Abu Kamael] admits: 'It was very simple, we were ethnically cleansing. Anyone Sunni was guilty: if you were called Omar, Uthman, Zayed, Sufian or something like that, then you would be killed. These are Sunni names and you are killed according to identity.'⁹

Muqtada Al-Sadr has repeatedly denied that he has anything to do with sectarian cleansing and death squads. He has claimed that the death squads are either rogue elements, which have exceeded his orders to target those actively involved in Sunni attacks on Shia areas, collaborators with the occupation forces or senior ex-Ba'athists; or else impostors attempting to discredit the Mahdi army.

However, even Cockburn is not altogether convinced of such denials. In Chapter ten where he describes the murder of the senior Shia cleric Sayyid Majid al-Khoel shortly after the fall of Saddam Hussein and the attempts by Muqtada Al-Sadr to deny that his supporters had anything to do with it, Cockburn remarks:

As I discovered at a Mahdi army checkpoint in Kufa a year later the Sadrist movement contains many violent young men loyal to Muqtada, but loosely under his control. It was a convenient excuse for the Sadrists in the coming years that they were not responsible for much of the violence carried out in their name.¹⁰

And in the concluding chapter, referring to the sectarian cleansing that followed the bombing of the Samarra mosque, Cockburn remarks:

The excuse that it was 'rogue elements' among his militiamen who were carrying out this slaughter is not convincing because the butchery was too extensive and too well organized to be the work of only marginal groups.¹¹

But even though he accepts that Muqtada Al-Sadr cannot escape all responsibility for the atrocities carried out in his name, Cockburn is prepared to excuse him for them. After all, for Cockburn, Muqtada Al-Sadr, with his mass base in what he calls the 'underclass' of Baghdad, is the true leader of the long oppressed Shia. As such the atrocities committed by the Sadrists must be understood as the result of the righteous anger of the oppressed.

But, as we shall now see, in taking this position regarding Muqtada Al-Sadr and the nature of the Sadrist movement, Cockburn has uncritically accepted the myths of Sadrists in particular and of Shia political Islam in general.

As such, for all his superficial criticisms and scepticism, Patrick Cockburn ends up as little more than an apologist for Muqtada al-Sadr.

Myths and legends

In chapter two of his book – entitled the Shia of Iraq – Cockburn recounts how, days after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, 'a million' Shia Iraqis from across central and southern Iraq answered Muqtada al-Sadr's call to make the mass pilgrimage to the holy city of Kerbala to commemorate the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. This mass pilgrimage to Kerbala, which for several years had been banned by Saddam Hussein, proved to be a decisive moment in the rise of Muqtada al-Sadr. Firstly, it provided a timely occasion to revive and mobilize the Sadrist movement, which had largely lain dormant since the murder of Sadr's father and two elder brothers in 1999. Secondly, with most of the leading Shia politicians and clerics still to return from exile, it catapulted Muqtada al-Sadr from being a rather obscure junior cleric to national prominence.

In order to explain the symbolic importance of Muqtada al-Sadr's call for this mass pilgrimage for the devout Shia of Iraq, Cockburn then goes on to explain the significance of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at the battle of Kerbala in 680AD for Shia Islam. This explanation then serves as the starting point for Cockburn to present what he describes as the 'complex' and 'rich' history of the Shia of Iraq. For Cockburn this 'history of the Iraqi Shia' is essential to understanding the politics of present day Iraq; and it's a failure to appreciate this 'history' that, for Cockburn, is the source of many of the problems the Americans have faced during the occupation.

Unfortunately, whatever the rich and complex history the Shia of Iraq may have, what Cockburn presents us with, in what accounts for more than a third of his book, is rather poor – being more myth than history. It does momentarily occur to him that it is dangerous to read history backwards,¹² but this is precisely what Cockburn proceeds to do. Indeed, Cockburn ends up regurgitating the Sadrist myths that during his numerous interviews he has swallowed whole.

Cockburn relates in some detail the fairytale-like legends that surround the family feud that culminated in the battle of Kerbala and the resulting schism between Sunni and Shia Islam. In doing so Cockburn certainly provides a valuable insight into why Shia Islam may be perceived by Sadrists and others as being the religion of the heroic resistance of the poor and oppressed; and consequently why Sunni Islam may be seen to be the religion of the oppressors. But, by uncritically relating this myth, Cockburn slips into implicitly accepting this perception as being essentially true. Significantly Cockburn neither puts the Sunni side of the story nor places this episode in its historical context.

Of course, Shia Islam is far from being the only religion that exalts the poor and oppressed. Christianity is another. But as we know from the history of Christianity, religions that exalt poverty, and promise redemption through the return of a Messiah in the distant future – which in the case of Shia Islam will occur with the return of the twelfth imam,

⁹ p. 230.

¹⁰ p. 158.

¹¹ p. 249.

¹² p. 29.

Muhammad al-Mahdi¹³ – usually serve to inculcate resignation in the poor and oppressed. In order to explain the historical dominance of its ‘quietist’ and apolitical tradition, Cockburn is obliged to admit that for much of its history Shia Islam in Iraq has served to reconcile the poor and oppressed with their lot. But what Cockburn avoids admitting is that, as such, although Shia Islam in Iraq and elsewhere may claim to be a religion of the ‘poor and oppressed’ it also equally has been a religion for the rich and powerful. Indeed, just like the bishops and cardinals of the Christian Church, the clerical hierarchy of Shia Islam – the *marji’iyya* – has been drawn from the rich and powerful families and has traditionally been an integral part of the dominant classes.



Having related the myths of the battle of Kerbala in some detail, Cockburn glosses over the next 1300 years in little more than a page. From now on the remainder of Cockburn’s account of the history of the Shia in Iraq becomes little more than the lineage of Muqtada al-Sadr. Like all of the major families of what Cockburn himself terms the ‘clerical aristocracy’ the Sadr family claims direct descent from the prophet Muhammad. However, the first of the Sadr family that Cockburn can tell us much about is Sayyid Muhammad al-Sadr, who, we are told, played a prominent role in the ‘Shia’ uprising against British rule in 1920.

Yet what Cockburn does not say is that following the suppression of this uprising the British sought to maintain their hold of Iraq by renewing their efforts in shoring up the traditional dominant classes. In southern Iraq this included the tribal leaders, who were being rapidly transformed into rapacious landlords, merchants and money lenders. As a result these dominant classes, including leading families of the ‘clerical aristocracy’ became an integral part of the pro-British ruling class of Iraq under the rule of King Faisal. Indeed, as Cockburn himself lets slip, Sayyid Muhammad al-Sadr ‘became a long term president of the senate and briefly prime minister in 1948’.¹⁴

The 1950s saw rapid growth in the Communist party of Iraq, which united landless peasants, the growing working

class and the professional middle classes. The Communist party played a central role in the revolution of 1958, which overthrew the regime of King Faisal and swept away the pro-British factions of the old ruling class. Cockburn claims that, because the majority of the Communist party were Shia, this was really a Shia revolution! Equally, because the majority of the officer corps of the Iraqi army happened to be Sunni, then the subsequent army coups, which eventually led to the establishment of the Ba’athist regime, were in effect a Sunni counter-revolution.

This is nonsense. Firstly, Cockburn’s claim that the 1958 revolution was a ‘Shia revolution’ is like claiming that the French revolution was a catholic revolution because the majority of the *sans culottes* happen to have been catholic! Secondly, the 1958 revolution itself was started by a coup by army officers. Thirdly, in the subsequent uprisings that swept much of southern Iraq the ‘Shia’ peasants clearly felt little compunction about lynching their ‘Shia’ landlords en masse. Fourthly, although it was to be drawn disproportionately from Sunni army officers, the Ba’athist regime was far from being exclusively ‘Sunni’.

The 1958 revolution was a nationalist and anti-imperialist revolution that, by sweeping away the old reactionary factions of the ruling class, which had been allied to British imperialism, had sought to establish a modern and secular Iraq. The subsequent counter-revolution, which established the Ba’athist regime, was a counter-revolution that arose out of the revolution itself. It was a counter-revolution made to check the growing power of both the Communist party and the working classes, not to restore the old order, and as such remained committed to establishing a modern and secular Iraq.

For the remnants of the old ruling classes religious faith gained a renewed importance as the principal means of holding themselves together as a class. Most of those of the former ruling classes sought to keep their heads down, mind their own business and accommodate themselves with the new political order. This was reflected in the continued predominance of the ‘quietist’ traditions of the *marji’iyya*. A few, however, sought to oppose the new order by rallying behind the Dawa party. The Dawa party (from Dawa meaning the ‘call to Islam’) had been founded shortly before the 1958 revolution as a political party based on Shia Islam that would seek to turn back the growing tide of secularism in Iraq. Two prominent families of the Shia clerical aristocracy played a central role in founding this party; the Sadr family, which was now headed by the son of Sayyid Muhammad al-Sadr, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (who Cockburn calls Sadr I for short), and the Hakim family.

By concentrating almost exclusively on the petty intrigues of the Dawa party in his account of the 1960s and 1970s, Cockburn gives the impression that they were the principal opposition to the Ba’athist regime. But, as Cockburn occasionally admits in passing, during this time Iraq had become both socially and politically a predominantly secular society. The main competing political ideologies were those of the secular Kurdish nationalist parties, the secular Communist party and the secular pan-Arab nationalism of the Ba’athist party. The Dawa party made little head way in building a popular base amongst an increasing secular Iraqi population, and hence remained a marginal and largely irrelevant political force.

¹³ Hence the name of Muqtada al-Sadr’s militia – the Mahdi army – which is supposed to be preparing the way for the return of Muhammad al-Mahdi.

¹⁴ p. 35.

It was only briefly at the end of the 1970s that the Dawa party gained political prominence as an 'opposition' to the Ba'athist regime, and then it was more the doing of Saddam Hussein than any success they may have had in building a mass movement. Following the overthrow of the Shah, Saddam Hussein saw the opportunity of exploiting Iran weakness to launch a war. Many of the leading families of the *marji'iyah* in Iraq were Iranian, just as many of its leading families in Iran were Iraqi. As a consequence the Dawa party could be seen to have close connections with Khomeini and his theocratic regime, which was consolidating its power in Iran. As part of his efforts to stir up anti-Iranian feeling, Saddam Hussein pumped up the Dawa party as a Trojan horse from the Iranian regime that seriously threatened Iraq. In 1980, shortly after starting the war with Iran, Saddam Hussein had Sadr I murdered. The Dawa party fractured, with many of its members fleeing into exile.

The subsequent Iran-Iraq war presents a problem for Cockburn. If, as he insists, the religious identity of Iraqis was so important, why didn't the 'long oppressed' Shia of southern Iraq rise up in support of the 'Shia revolution' in neighbouring Iran? Furthermore, given that most of the lower ranks of the Iraqi army were Shia, why did they continue to fight their co-religionists for eight long years? Cockburn's main explanation is that the Shia feared brutal repression if they mutinied.¹⁵ Indeed, this would seem to be supported by what Cockburn terms the 'Shia' uprising in southern Iraq, which occurred following the American invasion of Iraq in 1991, when it seemed that the repressive grip of the Ba'athist regime had finally been broken.

But remarkably Cockburn is unable to provide much to substantiate his claim that the uprising in southern Iraq, which was sparked by mutinying Iraqi soldiers fleeing Kuwait, was a particularly 'Shia' uprising, rather than a general uprising against the regime. Indeed, as he himself points out, calls by senior Shia clerics to respect property and set up Islamic councils were widely ignored.

It is only after the 1991 invasion that political Islam began to gain ground in Iraq; and perhaps rather ironically, this advance of political Islam was to a significant extent due to the designs of Saddam Hussein. As Cockburn points out, after the Iran-Iraq war, with the pan-Arab nationalist ideology of the Ba'athist party largely discredited, Saddam Hussein had increasingly turned to religion as an ideological support for his regime. 'God is great' in Arabic was inscribed on the national flag and, after the US invasion, Saddam Hussein promised to build a 'hundred' new mosques. But, perhaps far more importantly, Saddam Hussein promoted Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr (Sadr II) – who was the son-in-law of Sadr I and father of Muqtada al-Sadr – as the leading Shia cleric in order to help create a cultural revival of Islam in Iraq.

After the long war with Iran, the bombing and invasion by the US and the imposition of punitive economic sanctions, the economic situation of the once relatively prosperous Iraq had become desperate by the 1990s. Cockburn argues that, with pan-Arabism and socialism largely discredited, such

conditions proved particularly fertile for the revival of Islam, particularly amongst the younger generations of the poor and dispossessed. As a consequence, with the backing and generous funding from the state, Sadr II was able to build both an effective organisation and a substantial popular base. This was particularly the case in what has now become known as Sadr City in east Baghdad, which became the principal base for the Sadrist movement.

For many Dawaists that had gone into exile, Sadr II had sold out. He was seen as a traitor and, perhaps quite correctly, as a collaborator with Saddam Hussein's regime. Sadrists, as Cockburn tells us, now claim, with the benefit of hindsight, that Sadr II was really 'tricking' Saddam Hussein into allowing him to build up the Sadrist movement under the guise that it was merely a cultural movement. However, Sadr II suffered the fate of all former collaborators with Ba'athist regime. In 1999 Saddam Hussein had him, together with his two eldest sons, murdered. This effectively decapitated the Sadrist movement. If Sadr II was 'tricking' Saddam Hussein it was a 'trick' that only came to fruition with the aid of the American invasion.

As we have seen, Cockburn's attempt to present the Sadrist movement as representing a long struggle of the poor Shia against Sunni oppression simply does not stand up. The Sadrist family was part of the old traditional Iraqi ruling class, and as such had been collaborators with British imperialism. Although Sadr I may have been a bitter opponent of the Ba'athist regime, he was largely irrelevant. His successor built up the Sadrist movement in collaboration with Saddam Hussein. Now we shall see how far Muqtada al-Sadr has been a collaborator with US imperialism.

Muqtada al-Sadr, Iraqi nationalism and the 'resistance'

Patriotism: The last refuge of a scoundrel?

It has been claimed that Muqtada al-Sadr sees himself as being first of all an Iraqi, secondly an Arab and only thirdly a Shia.¹⁶ Certainly Muqtada al-Sadr has sought to present himself as an Iraqi nationalist who has consistently opposed foreign intervention in Iraq, not only from the US-led coalition forces, but also from both the international jihadi militants of Al-Qaida and the interference of Iran. Muqtada al-Sadr's nationalist claims have not only been important in defining the distinctive identity of the Sadrist movement, but also for his attempts to appeal to Iraqis beyond his rather narrow popular base.

Muqtada al-Sadr's claim to be a nationalist has been a vital part of his riposte to the accusations from his rivals within the UIA that his father was a collaborationist with Saddam Hussein. Not only can he answer that the Sadr family had the courage to stay in Iraq, while his Shia rivals fled to the comforts and safety of exile, he is able to point to the close connections that many of his rivals within the UIA have with Iran. This is particularly true of al-Sadr's most bitter rivals, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). SCIRI was formed as a breakaway faction from the Dawa party by followers of the Hakim family based in Iran in

¹⁵ In fact there were mass mutinies during the Iran-Iraq war. But mutinies cannot be identified as being Shia mutinies – being either communist or Kurdish nationalist uprisings – they have been written out of Cockburn's Sadrist history of Iraq. See *Ten days that shook Iraq*, Wildcat (UK), BM CAT, London WC1N 3XX, UK, or PO BOX 3305

¹⁶ This would seem to suggest that even Muqtada al-Sadr acknowledges that Iraqi nationalism and pan-Arabism still remain far more powerful ideologies amongst the Iraqi population than Shia political Islam.

the 1980s. It was given generous support by their host Iranian regime. Indeed, its militia – the Badr Brigades – were trained and equipped by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and fought beside them against Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war.

By portraying what have become known as the Sunni insurgent groups as being dependent on the foreign forces of Al-Qaida, and by presenting the Badr Brigades as merely a tool of Iran, Muqtada al-Sadr has been able to claim that his Sadrist movement and Mahdi army is the only truly nationalist force that has consistently opposed the US occupation of Iraq both politically and militarily. How far this claim is accepted in Iraq beyond the ranks of the Sadrist movement is unclear. Muqtada al-Sadr's claim that the Sadrist movement is the true nationalist, and indeed, anti-imperialist force opposing the US occupation is one that has gained significant traction within the anti-war movement and the anti-imperialist left in the west.

Certainly Cockburn is sympathetic to Muqtada al-Sadr's nationalist and anti-imperialist claims. However, Cockburn faces serious problems defending them. Firstly, as Cockburn has to admit, Muqtada al-Sadr has his own links with the Iranian regime. Secondly, if it is the case that the Sadrist movement has consistently opposed the US occupation, why were there Sadrist ministers in the collaborationist Iraq government? Thirdly, if Muqtada al-Sadr is such a nationalist opposed to the US occupation why has he allowed his Mahdi army to wage not only a sectarian war against the Sunnis but also against rival Shia militias?

First of all we shall consider Muqtada al-Sadr's relationship with the Iranian regime and then we shall examine Cockburn's contention that he is an anti-sectarian nationalist who has consistently opposed the occupation.

Muqtada al-Sadr and Iran

Firstly, let us consider the question of Muqtada al-Sadr's links with Iran. It is certainly true, that with the growing diplomatic confrontation between the US and Iran, the US government has made strenuous efforts to find evidence that Iran has been supplying arms to Iraqi militia, particularly to the Mahdi army. Yet, as Cockburn points out, they have failed to find any convincing evidence of such arms supplies. But, given the large black market in weapons in the Middle East there is little need for the Iranian government to supply arms directly. They can simply provide the cash, which is far more difficult to uncover.

Certainly the Iranian regime has a vital interest in promoting a degree of instability in Iraq. As one of its main rivals in the region, anything that divides and weakens Iraq serves to strengthen the position of Iran. More immediately, with the threat posed to Iran by the US, instability in Iraq ties down a large part of the American army. However, it also true that it is not in the interests of the Iranian regime to see the complete political disintegration of Iraq. This would inevitably create a political vacuum that would inevitably suck in other powers in the region – such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Syria – with unpredictable consequences. As a consequence, the Iranian regime has been playing a complex game. By exerting its influence in Iraq, particularly through its links with the Shia parties and their militia, the Iranian regime has sought to make itself indispensable for any lasting settlement that would allow the US to withdraw from Iraq. As such, its influence in Iraq provides the Iranian regime with a valuable bargaining counter with the US.

Of all the Shia parties it is SCIRI that has the strongest links with the Iranian regime. However, they are not simply instruments of Tehran. SCIRI has sought to play the Iranians off against the Americans. Indeed, of all the Shia parties, SCIRI has perhaps done most in accommodating the US.¹⁷ As a result, Janus-like, SCIRI is widely seen as being alternatively both pro-American and pro-Iranian. Iran has therefore had to hedge its bets. As an 'experienced Iraqi Shia' commentator told Cockburn 'it is impossible to oppose Iran because they are paying all the pro-Iranian parties – and they are paying all the anti-Iranian parties as well'.¹⁸

Muqtada al-Sadr, as a Shi'ite leader with a significant popular base and a formidable militia, would seem an ideal candidate to be an ally for the Iranian regime. But has Muqtada al-Sadr been willing to accept support from Iran? Although he may claim to oppose Iranian interference in Iraq, Muqtada al-Sadr has shown himself to be far from hostile to the Shia regime in Tehran. As Cockburn tell us, as early as June of 2003 al-Sadr went to Iran and had meetings with 'the Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Khameni, and, reportedly, also with Qasim Suleimani, the commander of the Qods Brigade (a special foreign department of the Intelligence arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards)'.¹⁹ For Cockburn, establishing cordial relations with Tehran at this time is evidence of the astuteness of Muqtada al-Sadr as a politician. But as Cockburn then goes on to admit 'Iran did provide a useful safe haven and potential source of supplies and money for the nascent Medhi army'.²⁰ Has Muqtada al-Sadr subsequently drawn on these Iranian supplies and money? Cockburn attempts to wriggle out of this question. Although he insists that Iranian backing is a largely a conspiracy theory propagated by al-Sadr's opponents, Cockburn eventually admits that after 2005 the Mahdi army did begin to receive substantial material support from Iran.²¹ Cockburn tries to get round this by saying the acceptance of this material was the work of infiltrators and was opposed by Muqtada al-Sadr. But in the end Cockburn seems to not quite to believe such excuses. As a result, as a last line of defence, Cockburn blames the American for driving Muqtada al-Sadr into the arms of the Iranian regime.



¹⁷ SCIRI ministers in the Iraqi government have played a prominent role in pushing through legislation preparing the way for the privatization of Iraq's oil.

¹⁸ p. 167.

¹⁹ p. 167.

²⁰ p. 168.

²¹ p. 205.

Muqtada al-Sadr's 'betrayal of the resistance': Sectarianism and collaboration

Whatever his links may be with the repressive theocratic regime in Tehran, what is more important for Cockburn, and perhaps more so for many of the anti-war/anti-imperialist left amongst his readership, is Muqtada al-Sadr's claim to have consistently opposed the US occupation. Of course, it may be true enough that Muqtada al-Sadr has repeatedly spoken out against the occupation. However, this is not saying that much. Given its great unpopularity amongst Iraqis, all the parties of Iraq have repeatedly called for an early end to the occupation. What is more, as Cockburn himself complains, Muqtada al-Sadr's words do not live up to his actions.

Nevertheless it is true that Mahdi army has repeatedly found itself fighting US troops. Often Muqtada al-Sadr has been obliged to disown some of these conflicts with the coalition forces as 'rogue elements' or present them as merely self-defence. But what he, and his apologists, are able to tout loudly as evidence of his resolute resistance to the occupation is that Muqtada al-Sadr and the Mahdi army led two armed uprisings in the Spring and Summer of 2004. Cockburn gives us vivid eyewitness accounts of these uprisings, which show the determination, commitment and heroism of the Mahdi army in what became an unequal battle with the Coalition forces. But as we shall see, what is more significant than the uprisings themselves is the reasons that led to them, and what is even more important is what Muqtada al-Sadr did to end them, and the dire consequences this was to have on the 'Iraqi resistance'.

As the first anniversary of the invasion approached it was becoming clear even to the Bush regime that the resistance of 'die-hard Ba'athists' would not fade away soon. Indeed, opposition and resistance to the occupation was steadily growing. In many of the cities, particularly in central Iraq, whole districts had become effectively self-governing no-go areas, where coalition troops were unable to enter without the concentration of considerable military force. At the same time, both Coalition patrols and bases were coming under daily attack.

In the Summer of 2003 Muqtada al-Sadr had been quick to revive the Sadrist movement and in July he had announced the formation of the Mahdi army as its military wing. Yet, as Cockburn puts it, in the Autumn he seriously 'overplayed his hand'.²² On October 10 Muqtada al-Sadr announced that he was forming a 'shadow government' and days later his supporters made an abortive attempt to capture shrines in Kerbala. The Americans responded by moving into Sadr City and deposing the Sadrist local council. Muqtada al-Sadr attempted to counter this by calling for mass demonstrations in Sadr City, but, as Cockburn admits, they proved to be a damp squib.

By November Muqtada al-Sadr had abandoned all his vehement anti-occupation rhetoric. He now adopted the line being put out by the most senior Shia cleric the Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, and the Shia parties, that the 'coalition forces were 'guests' in Iraq and the main enemy were survivors of Saddam's regime'.²³ Of course, for Cockburn, this humiliating climb down after a reckless and ill-conceived attempt to seize power was a deft tactical retreat that demonstrates al-Sadr's astuteness as a political leader.

With his anti-Sunni rhetoric, and his promise that the Mahdi army would protect the Shia, Muqtada al-Sadr was able to regain some support following the al-Qaida bombings on March 2, which killed 270 Shia pilgrims at Kerbala and the Kadhimiyyah shrine in Baghdad. However, for the Americans at this time the main military and political resistance to the occupation came, not from the Sadrists, but from the loose alliance of ex-Ba'athists, Nationalists and various Sunni Islamic groups.

On March 31st 2004, American mercenaries were killed in Fallujah and their bodies hacked to pieces. The subsequent attempts by the American army to reassert its control provoked a full scale uprising across the city. These events coincided with moves by the Coalition authorities to clamp down on Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist movement. Earlier in March orders had been issued for the closure of the Sadrist newspaper *al-Hawza* and the arrest of Muqtada al-Sadr for the murder of cleric Sayyid Majid al-Kheol. These moves served to mobilize the Sadrist movement. Muqtada al-Sadr now resumed his anti-occupation rhetoric.

On April 4th leading Sadrists were arrested. Taking advantage of the fact that the Americans' attention was concentrated on the insurrection in Fallujah, the Mahdi army launched its own armed uprisings in Sadr City, Najaf, Kut, Nasiriyah, Kufa and elsewhere. However, even the Italian army stationed in Nasiriyah, weighed down as it was by having to carry vast quantities of pasta, was able to swiftly put down these uprisings. It was only in Sadr City and the holy cities of Najaf and Kufa that the uprisings were able to hold out for any length of time.

Significantly, Cockburn makes no claim that these uprisings were in anyway in solidarity with the uprising in Fallujah. What is more, Cockburn does not tell us what Muqtada al-Sadr's views were on the Fallujah insurrection. Indeed, it is all too likely that Muqtada al-Sadr saw the Fallujah insurrection as an uprising of his 'Ba'athist'/'Sunni' enemies. The immediate aim of the Sadrist uprisings was to repulse the attempts by the Americans to close down the Sadrist movement, and in doing so brought the Mahdi army into direct military confrontation with the occupying forces. However, by attempting to hold on to the holy cities of Najaf and Kufa, which were the centres of the *marji'iya*, Muqtada al-Sadr could hope to use the opportunity offered by the Fallujah uprising to strengthen his own position, by force of arms, as a Shia leader.

The Mahdi army's conflict with the Coalition forces in taking and holding the holy cities may have gained Muqtada al-Sadr support amongst those opposed to the occupation, but it was also to demonstrate his dependence on al-Sistani. Facing the prospect that they might lose control of Iraq, the US was reluctant to launch a full scale attack on the holy cities so as to crush the Mahdi army for fear of losing the goodwill of al-Sistani and the Shia parties whose support they needed to legitimate the scheduled formal transfer of power to an Iraqi provisional government in June. As a result, after a few weeks of siege a truce was agreed that allowed the Mahdi army to withdraw and suspended the arrest warrant issued against Muqtada al-Sadr.

The Bush regime now gave up all hope that the resistance would peter out on its own accord, thereby clearing the way for the Iraqi population, grateful for their liberation, to elect the American's protégé, and long-time exile, Ahmed Chalabi as their leader. They now adopted Plan B; to back a

²² p. 170.

²³ p. 171.

strongman who could direct the newly reconstituted Iraqi army to lead the crushing of the resistance. To this end the Americans insisted that the former Ba'athist and Shi'ite Iyad Allawi be appointed the Prime Minister of the new Provisional Government.

By August it was becoming clear that Allawi's first move would be against the Sadrists. After a series of clashes in Najaf, Muqtada al-Sadr sent the Mahdi army to retake the city. As Cockburn points out, Muqtada al-Sadr was in a stronger position than in the Spring. The Sadrists had consolidated their control over Sadr City and the Mahdi army was stronger and better equipped. However, al-Sistani and the Shia parties now wanted Muqtada al-Sadr brought to heel, even if it meant wrecking large parts of Najaf. As Cockburn suggests, al-Sistani gave tacit approval for Allawi and the Americans to launch a full scale attack on the Mahdi army in Najaf so long as they did no damage the holy shrines.

As a result the Mahdi army suffered heavy casualties as they were forced back and obliged to hold out in the Imam Ali shrine and the nearby Wadi al-Salaam cemetery. Yet for days the American and Iraqi government troops failed to break them despite overwhelming firepower that was damaging large areas of Najaf. Eventually, after returning from a medical operation in London, al-Sistani brokered a deal along lines similar to that which ended the first siege of Najaf in the Spring.

This proved to be a master stroke on the part of al-Sistani. Having spent a year cajoling the fractious Shia parties to form what was to become the UIA, and having allowed the Americans to bring to heel the young upstart Muqtada, al-Sistani was able to show that he was indispensable to the Americans. As a consequence, al-Sistani was now in a position to strike what was to prove a crucial deal with the US. Al-Sistani assured the Americans that all the Shia parties, including the Sadrists, would stand aside while the Coalition forces crushed the 'Sunni' rebellion in Fallujah and the Anbar province. In return the US had to agree to stop their procrastinations and hold early national elections in Iraq.

As a result, within a few days of the presidential elections in the USA, which saw the return of Bush as President, the coalition forces moved to crush the rebellion in Fallujah. A few weeks later, early in 2005, elections were held for a national assembly of Iraq. With their well organized and funded campaign, and with the tacit recognition of the Americans, the UIA won the largest number of seats in the assembly. After months of wrangling, the UIA then was able to form a coalition government with the two Kurdish nationalist parties – the KDP and KUP.

Following the end of the siege of Najaf Muqtada al-Sadr fell in behind al-Sistani's collaborationist strategy. Although Muqtada al-Sadr expressed a few qualms about holding an election while the country was occupied by foreign power, the Sadrist movement duly fought the election as part of the UIA and won 35 seats in the 275 seat assembly, and were subsequently rewarded for their collaboration with six ministries in the Provisional Government.

Cockburn presents Muqtada al-Sadr's willingness to fall in behind al-Sistani's deal with the Americans as another of his astute tactical retreats. Indeed, to sustain this Cockburn claims that the biggest losers in this deal were the US and Allawi.

But of course, by far the biggest losers of al-Sistani's deal were the people of Fallujah. After all, as a result of this

deal, a quarter of a million people were forced to flee their homes and then wait while their city was pulverized by the American's overwhelming firepower. For the predominantly Sunni population of Fallujah and Anbar, which had already borne much of the brunt of the repression meted out by the occupying forces, Sistani's deal with the Americans was an unmitigated act of betrayal. Not only had the Shia parties stood by while Fallujah was destroyed but they took advantage of the subsequent political situation to gain the fruits of office for themselves.²⁴ As a consequence, al-Sistani's deal poured oil on the fire of sectarian tensions that were to bring Iraq to the brink of civil war in a little more than a year later.

It is certainly true that the US had to drop Allawi, and with him their plan B, and accept that the Provisional Government would be dominated by the decidedly pro-Iranian parties of the UIA. However, the Americans had been facing the prospect that, with the growing opposition and resistance to the occupation, they would lose their grip on Iraq. Their deal with al-Sistani divided Iraq along sectarian lines. In increasing numbers Iraqi militia now began attacking Iraqis rather than US troops.

As we have already pointed out, Cockburn does not seek to deny that the Mahdi army was involved in the subsequent sectarianism and sectarian killings. He also does not altogether deny that in falling in behind al-Sistani's deal Muqtada al-Sadr contributed to increasing sectarian tensions. However, Cockburn puts forward the excuse that it was the Sunnis who started the sectarian killings and that the 'Sunni insurgency' as a whole increasingly adopted an anti-Shia jihadist and Salafist ideology. Cockburn admits there was considerable sympathy with the Fallujah uprising, with many Shia giving blood for the wounded insurgents. He also mentions that Fallujah insurgents came to support the Sadrists during the second siege of Najaf, providing invaluable military expertise. However, following the bombing of Shia pilgrims at Kerbala in March there had been further sectarian bombings through the Spring and Summer. As a result, Cockburn claims that by the Autumn of 2004 the 'Shia of Baghdad' had lost their patience with the 'Sunni insurgents' and wanted the 'rebellion in Fallujah crushed'.²⁵ Muqtada al-Sadr therefore had little choice but to accept Sistani's collaboration with the Americans.

Of course, it cannot be disputed that sectarian bombings began before al-Sistani's deal with the Americans and were targeted against what were deemed the Shia population. However, these bombings were not carried out by insurgents in Fallujah, but by al-Qaida. At that time Al-Qaida in Iraq was largely made up of foreign militants that had flocked to Iraq to join the international jihad against the US. They only made up a small part of the insurgency. With al-Sistani's and the Shia parties' 'betrayal' of Fallujah, and the subsequent formation of the collaborationist government, al-Qaida's anti-Shia position appeared vindicated. As a consequence, al-

²⁴ Cockburn details how the ministries under Sadrist control were run along sectarian lines. In the ministry for health, for example, medical staff, including doctors, who were deemed to be Sunnis were purged. Cockburn excuses the Sadrists for this on the grounds that other ministries controlled by the Kurdish nationalist parties and the other Shia parties of the UIA were also run along ethnic and sectarian lines!

²⁵ p. 207.



Qaida were able to recruit Iraqis in large numbers and took the ideological lead in what now became identified in reaction to the collaboration of the UIA as the 'Sunni insurgency'. Indeed, many of the insurgent groups now abandoned their nationalism and adopted a jihadist ideology.

Eventually, after much beating about the bush, Cockburn is obliged to ask the crucial question: 'Did Muqtada have any alternative to joining the Shia coalition? Could he ever have united with the Sunni insurgents to form a common front against the occupation?'²⁶ Although he argues that the US had been eager to make a deal to end at least the first uprising in Najaf for fears that the 'Shia' and 'Sunni' might combine, Cockburn answers that 'the romantic vision of the a popular front of Shia and Sunni was never really feasible'.²⁷

Cockburn may well be right in this; but not for the facile reasons he puts forward. Cockburn suggests that such unity was ultimately unfeasible because of the 1000 year old enmities that divide the Iraqi population between Sunni and Shia. Of course, this is not to be taken to imply that the Sadrist are sectarian. Oh no, Cockburn is insistent that they are anti-sectarian; a) because Muqtada al-Sadr says so, b) because his father once told his followers to pray in Sunni mosques and c) because Muqtada al-Sadr offered (rather belatedly three months after Fallujah) to arbitrate between Sunni and Shia.²⁸ For Cockburn, the problem is that, despite anything they may say about being nationalist and wanting to unite all Iraqis against the occupation, the Sunnis are irrevocably sectarian and want to continue their age old domination of Iraq.

But it is not enough to take Muqtada al-Sadr's claims to be an anti-sectarian nationalist who has been consistently opposed to the US occupation at face value, and then put all the blame on the Sunni insurgency for creating sectarian divisions. By following Sistani's strategy of collaboration with the US Muqtada al-Sadr had effectively abandoned his

opposition to the occupation. As such it cannot be said that he has 'consistently opposed the occupation'. Indeed, as we have seen, and will see further when we come to consider his response to the American surge in 2007, Muqtada al-Sadr has continually vacillated between resistance and collaboration with the US occupation. Furthermore, as we have argued, by siding with the US against the 'Sunnis' Muqtada al-Sadr help to create these sectarian divisions.

If a combined front against the US occupation was never really feasible, it was in no small part due to sectarianism of Muqtada Al-Sadr and the Sadrist movement. As Cockburn himself shows, central to the Sadrist ideology is the need to overthrow the 1400 year domination of the Sunnis. Hence, it is no surprise that the Sadrists see the US as a lesser evil than the Sunnis. However, the inherent sectarianism of the Sadrist movement and its propensity to vacillate between resistance and collaboration with the US occupation is not merely ideological but arises from a material and class basis as we shall now consider.

Muqtada al-Sadr and the nature of the Sadrist movement

Turning back the clock

The invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq has served to sweep away the last remaining remnants of the legacy of the 1958 revolution. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, and the consequent collapse of the Ba'athist party-state, together with the wholesale privatisation of the Iraqi economy, shattered the state-dependent industrial bourgeoisie of Iraq, which had grown up in the wake of 1958.

In the weeks following the coalition's 'victory' the exiled political representatives of the old ruling class flooded back to Iraq. Rallying the factions of the old ruling class, which had been dominant in southern Iraq, around Shia political Islam and the *marji'iyah*, al-Sistani and the leaders of SCIRI and the Dawa party sought to fill the political vacuum and restore the old political and social order.²⁹ As in the old days they have been eager to collaborate with imperialism – although now it is US not British imperialism – in return for a small slice of the profits. Under the collaborationist government of the UIA and the Kurdish nationalists, the oil companies that exploited Iraq oil in the old days are back and are being offered long term production sharing agreements which are remarkably similar to the ones signed in the 1930s.³⁰

By defining themselves in terms of Shia political Islam the parties of UIA have been able to cut both the rival factions of the old ruling class and the remnants of the state-dependent bourgeoisie out of the deal with American imperialism. The response of both these rival factions of the old ruling class and the Ba'athist bourgeoisie has taken two (not necessarily mutually exclusive) forms. Firstly they have sought to present themselves as alternative collaborators for US imperialism or else they have supported the resistance to the occupation. In the face of the success of the UIA, these opposing factions of the Iraqi ruling class have increasingly abandoned any nationalist or pan-Arab ideology and have

²⁶ p. 206

²⁷ p. 207.

²⁸ See pp. 206-7.

²⁹ Sistani and tribal leaders.

³⁰ See Hands Off Iraqi Oil for an analysis of the prospective oil contracts being offered to the transnational oil companies such as Shell and BP.

instead have adopted Sunni political Islamic ideology. Thus we have the sharp suited Green Zone politicians of the Islamic party, which claims to represent Sunni Iraq in the National Assembly, and as we have seen the increasingly jihadist and Salafist 'Sunni' insurgency.

As a consequence, the growth of sectarian violence is not as Cockburn and the American ideologists insist, the result of age old sectarian enmities between the Sunni oppressors and the Shia oppressed, which have been released by the occupation. Instead this sectarianism is the ideological form through which the factional struggles within the Iraqi ruling classes are being fought out.



Muqtada al-Sadr

As we have seen, Muqtada al-Sadr descends from a rich and powerful family that has been an integral part of the *marji'iya* and with it the old ruling class of Iraq. However, the Sadr clan has in recent times fallen into disrepute amongst their class. As we have seen, Muqtada al-Sadr's father – Sadr II – was widely regarded as a traitor for collaborating with Saddam Hussein. With his low ranking within the *marji'iya* hierarchy, Muqtada al-Sadr is seen as a young upstart who lacks religious authority. Furthermore, even his claim to be the legitimate representative of the illustrious Sadr family is rather dubious. This has allowed rivals to attempt to cut Muqtada al-Sadr, and his clan and associates, out of any deal with the US imperialists right from the beginning of the occupation.

However, Muqtada al-Sadr had one trump card over his rivals. From the outset he had a popular base and an already existent organisation in Iraq, which his rivals – who were mostly exiles – did not have. By mobilising his popular base and forming the Mahdi army, Muqtada al-Sadr was soon able to create an armed movement that neither his rivals amongst the Shia parties nor the Americans could ignore. Backed by this armed movement, Muqtada al-Sadr could then hope to press the claims of the Sadrist clan to its 'rightful inheritance' as part of the traditional ruling class of Iraq.

But the mobilization of the Sadrist movement was a double-edged sword. To mobilize his support amongst the 'poor and dispossessed' in Sadr City and elsewhere, Muqtada al-Sadr has had to deplore the 'quietism' of the *marji'iya*; he has had to denounce the leaders of the rival Shia parties for having spent a life of luxury in exile while those, like his supporters, had suffered the deprivation and repression in Iraq

and he has had to call for resistance to the occupation. Yet in doing so he has confirmed the allegations of his rivals that he is a rabble rousing firebrand who threatens class peace and accommodation with the US occupation. As such he has threatened to alienate his own class.

As a result of this contradiction, every time Muqtada al-Sadr has sought to mobilize the Sadrist movement he has been obliged to make a deft retreat, in which he has to profess his deference to al-Sistani and the authority of the *marji'iya*. Likewise his calls for resistance to the occupation have repeatedly been followed, as we have seen, by a willingness to collaborate.

The nature of the Sadrist movement

Cockburn is, on occasions, obliged to acknowledge that there are 'deep class divisions' within the Shia. Of course such 'class analysis' is always subordinated to Cockburn's sectarian based analysis that all of Iraq's Shia have somehow been oppressed since 680AD. Yet, although Cockburn's claim that Muqtada al-Sadr represents 'millions of the poor and dispossessed Shia of Iraq' is somewhat exaggerated, it cannot be denied that much of the support for the Sadrist movement, and most of the foot soldiers of the Mahdi army, is drawn from the slums of Sadr City and similar districts of Iraq's cities.

It could be argued that, although he may himself be drawn from the ruling class, Muqtada al-Sadr heads a movement that, however contradictory, in some sense 'represents' the dispossessed of Iraq. But of course, it could be equally argued that the US army is largely made up of recruits from the poorest sections of the American working class. Does that mean that in some sense the US army 'represents' the American working class? No, it would be necessary to see what the aims, nature and organisation of the US army is to see what it represents, and likewise we have to understand what the nature of the Sadrist movement is to see what it represents.

Cockburn presents us with considerable evidence as to the nature of Sadrist movement. The former Sadrist death squad leader Abu Kamael, interviewed by Cockburn, which we quoted earlier, goes on to tell Cockburn:

The Mahdi army is supposed to kill only Ba'athists, Takfiris [Sunni fanatics who do not regard Shia as Muslims], those who cooperate with the occupation and the occupation troops... It does not always happen like that though and it can turn into a mafia gang.³¹

Cockburn goes on to describe in some detail the emergence of 'district warlords' in Sadrist-controlled areas. He gives us the example of Abu Rusil, a former taxi driver who grew rich plundering the possessions of Sunni residents in his area. As Cockburn tell us:

Pledging loyalty to then distant figure of Muqtada his gunmen were wholly controlled by himself and killed any Shia that criticized his actions.³²

Muqtada al-Sadr had built his movement by gaining the allegiance of the heads of locally powerful families in the

³¹ p. 230.

³² p. 232.

neighbourhoods of Sadr City and similar impoverished districts of Iraq's cities where organized crime has become rife. Bestowed with the hallowed authority of Muqtada al-Sadr these families, together with newly emergent warlords, have been able to run protection rackets, kidnap people for ransom and plunder anyone deemed to be Sunnis or Ba'athists in the name of Islam. As such the Sadrist movement no more represents the poor and dispossessed than the mafia represents the poor and dispossessed of southern Italy or Moscow.

Nevertheless Cockburn is probably correct to dismiss *Newsweek's* characterisation of Muqtada al-Sadr as simply some kind of 'mafia don'. As we have seen, he is from a well-to-do family that has for generations been a part of the clerical hierarchy. As a consequence, the Sadrist movement can claim the allegiance of sections of the old ruling class. Being able to assume a certain degree of bourgeois respectability, ambitious members of this class have been more than willing to represent the Sadrists both in the Iraqi National Assembly and in the Green Zone more generally.

However, although they thrive in conditions of lawlessness offered by a weak state, mafia organisations require connections to state power. This is what Muqtada al-Sadr and the leadership of the Sadrist movement is able to provide. As Cockburn himself points out, in entering the collaborationist government in 2005, and gaining the control of ministries such as education, health and culture, the leadership of the Sadrist movement was able to determine the distribution of government money and jobs. This seems to have been vital to holding the Sadrist movement together.

So, on the one hand the Sadrist movement ideologically depends on its ability to mobilize its foot soldiers amongst the poor against the American occupation and rich former exiles that now collaborate in running the Iraqi government. On the other hand the Sadrist movement depends materially on its ability to make connections with the powers that be in order to gain control over government jobs and money. Thus it is not only the hope of Muqtada al-Sadr to reclaim his family's rightful inheritance as part of the Iraqi ruling class that has driven the vacillation between resistance and collaboration but also the inherent nature of the Sadrist movement itself.

Muqtada and the surge

In April 2007 Muqtada al-Sadr finally announced that he was breaking with the Iraqi government. At the same time he made overtures to various Sunni politicians inviting them to participate in a mass demonstration against the occupation. For many in the anti-war movement this was evidence that Muqtada al-Sadr was once more taking the lead in building a non-sectarian movement against the occupation. For Cockburn, this move also demonstrated the 'astuteness' of Muqtada al-Sadr as a politician in distancing himself from an increasingly unpopular government. However, the collaborationist government made up of rich exiles safely ensconced in the Green Zone had never enjoyed a great deal of popularity. To understand why Muqtada al-Sadr chose to resign from the government we have to briefly consider the broader political situation in both the USA and Iraq.

By 2006 it had become clear to many in the American ruling class that the invasion of Iraq had been a big mistake. With apparently no end in sight to the occupation, there were increasing calls on the Bush regime to cut its losses and

withdraw the troops from Iraq. This growing opposition to the war culminated in the mid-term congressional elections, which saw the Democrats take both houses of Congress on a platform of bringing the troops back home, and the subsequent dismissal of one of the prime advocates of the war Donald Rumsfeld from his post as Secretary of State for Defence.

However, rather than capitulating immediately to the demands for the withdrawal of US troops, Bush pressed for one last throw of the dice. Under the leadership of General Pretreus, Bush ordered an increase in troop levels to support one last effort to stabilize the situation in Iraq. It was a gamble that few at the time thought had much chance of success.

During the formation of the Iraqi government, which had followed the second national elections that had been held at the end 2005, the US had vetoed the re-appointment of the former Prime Minister and leader of the Dawa party – Ibrahim al-Jaafari. Instead a compromise candidate to become prime minister was found from the Dawa party – Nouri al-Maliki. Al-Maliki had close connections to the Sadr family and was able to depend on the support of the Sadrists. Indeed, for Maliki the Sadrists and the Mahdi army were an important counter-weight to SCIRI and their Badr Brigades in the UIA and the coalition government more generally.

During 2006, when the Mahdi army was establishing its control over much of Baghdad through its policy of sectarian cleansing, al-Maliki played an important role in shielding Muqtada al-Sadr from the American's accusations that he was responsible for the escalation of sectarian violence that was destabilising Iraq. With the surge there was a real danger that the extra US troops would allow the Americans to make a concerted effort to move against the Mahdi army. It seems likely that Maliki, and perhaps other Shia politicians in the UIA, put pressure on Muqtada al-Sadr to keep his head down and thereby avoid diverting the American surge from concentrating on the Sunni insurgency. Following the announcement of the surge Muqtada al-Sadr went in to hiding (his opponents alleged that he went to Iran), and order the Mahdi army to avoid confrontations with US troops.

Why did Muqtada al-Sadr re-emerge from hiding four months later while the surge was still going on? And why did he withdraw his ministers from the collaborationist government and once again announce his opposition to the occupation? There would seem to be three reasons that arise from Muqtada al-Sadr's relation to the Sadrist movement itself, his relation to al-Maliki and the Iraqi government and finally from the prospects of the American surge.

Firstly, as the US troops sought to reassert some semblance of control over Baghdad there were inevitable clashes with the Mahdi army that were leading to growing demands within the Sadrist movement for a more robust response to the surge. With Muqtada al-Sadr in hiding, it was becoming increasingly difficult for the Sadrist leadership to hold the line over avoiding unnecessary confrontation with the Americans. By re-emerging with tough anti-occupation rhetoric Muqtada al-Sadr could hope to rally the restless Sadrist movement behind his leadership once more.

Secondly, as Cockburn mentions, al-Maliki had ordered the arrest of several hundred Sadrists in January 2007. It is difficult to know if this was because al-Maliki was attempting to placate the Americans by taking action himself against the Sadrists; or if he thought the Sadrists had become too

powerful, having established their control over large parts of Baghdad, and was taking the opportunity to cut them down to size. Either way, with the Americans losing patience with Maliki's government the Sadrists in the government may have seen it better to jump before they were pushed. Indeed, at the time, it seemed likely that the Americans would dismiss the Maliki government sooner rather than later and attempt to replace it with a coalition bringing together Allawi, the Kurdish nationalist parties and Sunni parties. In such circumstances a timely break from al-Maliki's government, with accompanying overtures to Sunni politicians, would make sense in terms of the politics of collaboration within the 'Green Zone'.

Thirdly, in April 2007 it was still far from clear that the surge would ultimately succeed. There was a real prospect that pressure at home would force the American government to make a hasty exit from Iraq. By leaving the Iraqi government Muqtada al-Sadr would be free to strengthen his position in the civil war that was likely to follow the departure of the US from Iraq.

In the months that followed the Mahdi army concentrated its efforts on establishing a foothold in the vitally important oil rich regions of southern Iraq and, in particular, the city of Basra. Up until then these southern regions of Iraq had been the strongholds of the Sadrists' main rivals in the UIA – SCIRI; while was a strong hold for both the Hizb al-Fadhila party – which had broken way from the Sadrist movement at the very beginning of the occupation – and SCIRI. In order to establish a foothold the Mahdi army therefore, not only had to wage war on the British army, but also an internecine war on the Badr Brigades and Hizb al-Fadhila militia.

By the end of the Summer Muqtada al-Sadr could claim credit for having defeated the British army, and had established a firm foothold in Basra. But the wider situation in Iraq had by then dramatically changed. Not only had Maliki's government survived, but, far more importantly, Bush's last throw of the dice had turned up a double six. Using the extra troops provided by the surge, General Petraeus had been able to execute a far more intelligent political and military strategy than had previously been implemented during the occupation. By buying off many of Sunni insurgents and exploiting the revulsion of many Iraqis to the sectarianism of the militias, Petraeus has succeeded in driving al-Qaida out of their former strongholds in central Iraq.

As a consequence of General Petraeus's success in stabilising Iraq, the prospect of a hasty US withdrawal began to recede. Having gambled on the rising tide of civil war Muqtada al-Sadr now found himself beached. His reaction was once again to court favour with al-Sistani, the *marji'iyah* and indeed the Americans. After a major battle with the Badr Brigades at the end of August, Muqtada al-Sadr declared a six month ceasefire by the Mahdi army, and announced that he was to spend his time in seclusion so he could resume his studies to become an ayatollah.

By keeping his head down and by imposing a ceasefire on the Mahdi army, Muqtada al-Sadr could once again present the Sadrist movement as first and foremost a political movement acceptable to the Americans. Furthermore, with the consolidation of the Mahdi army's control of the newly won areas in Basra and southern Iraq, the Sadrists could hope to make considerable gains in the provincial elections scheduled for the Autumn of 2008. Muqtada al-Sadr could

then hope to persuade Maliki to allow the Sadrists back into the government.

However, this strategy depended on both maintaining the ceasefire, and retaining the control of the newly won areas in Basra and southern Iraq, so that Muqtada al-Sadr could be sure that the Mahdi army could 'persuade' the voters to vote for Sadrist candidates in the forthcoming elections. In February 2008 Muqtada al-Sadr announced that the ceasefire would be extended for another six months. But already it was becoming increasingly difficult for the Sadrist leadership to hold the line on the ceasefire. The truce in southern Iraq was increasingly being punctuated by clashes between units of the Iraqi army and the Badr Brigades (which were often one and the same³³) on the one side and units of the Mahdi army on the other. The extent to which such clashes arose out of attempts to provoke the Mahdi army to break the ceasefire, were attempts by the Badr Brigades to regain ground previously lost to the Sadrists, or were simply due to the ill-discipline of local Mahdi army units is hard to say. However, the result of such clashes was that the Sadrist leadership was having to disown the Mahdi army in southern Iraq as being made up of rogue elements.

At the end of March, possibly under pressure from both the Americans and his coalition partners SCIRI, Maliki decided to force the issue by launching a concerted military operation by the Iraqi army to break the Mahdi army in Basra. Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist leadership would have to decide whether the Mahdi army in Basra were rogue elements, and hence leave them unaided, or that they were an integral part of the Sadrist movement and therefore give them support. Muqtada al-Sadr chose the latter. The Mahdi army began mortar attacks on the Green Zone in Baghdad, while the Sadrist members of the National Assembly made speeches denouncing the operation.

In Basra the Mahdi army put up a fierce fight. As some units of the Iraqi army went over to the Sadrists, what had originally been intended as an independent Iraqi operation had to call on support from both British and American troops. After a nearly a week of intense fighting a deal was brokered between the Mahdi army in Basra and Maliki by the Iranian government. However, by coming down in favour of the 'rogue elements' of the Mahdi army in Basra, Muqtada al-Sadr gave the green light for American troops to make a concerted attack on the Sadrist strongholds across Iraq, particularly in Baghdad. After suffering heavy losses the Sadrists in Baghdad agreed to a truce on May 10. Fighting continued elsewhere until the end of the month when a broad agreement was made between Maliki's government and Muqtada al-Sadr.³⁴

Despite of this offensive Maliki and the Americans have failed to destroy the Mahdi army. However, the Sadrists seem to have lost control of considerable areas of both Basra and Baghdad. In areas where they still have political control the Mahdi army has been obliged to allow the Iraqi police and army to patrol and restrict their own public display of arms. Furthermore, Maliki has insisted that unless the Mahdi army is disbanded the Sadrists will not be allowed to contest the

³³ With SCIRI controlling the ministries concerning security and defence, much of the National Iraqi army is made up of units of the Badr Brigades.

³⁴ See reports in *al-Arabiya*, May 10 2008. 'The heat is on Muqtada' by Sami Moubayed, *Asia Times*, May 2 2008.

Provincial elections. Muqtada al-Sadr has responded over the Summer by attempting to build a broad political alliance within the National Assembly against Maliki's government around the issue of the security pact currently being negotiated with the US and declaring that the Sadrists will support other parties in the Provincial elections.³⁵

Once again with the surge we see how the inherent contradictions of the Sadrist movement has driven Muqtada al-Sadr to vacillate between collaboration and resistance to the US occupation. Certainly the American attacks on Sadrist strongholds, particularly Sadr City, are likely to have strengthened Muqtada al-Sadr's support among his followers in the short term. However, if Muqtada al-Sadr is to hold the Sadrist movement together in the long-term he needs to control the distribution of jobs and money by rejoining the government. But at present this does not look very likely.



Cockburn as a front for the SWP

The contradiction of Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist movement are reflected in Cockburn's main line of argument in the book. On the one hand it seems that Cockburn wants to be an advisor to the US administration. He wants to claim that the Americans have been ill-advised in seeing Muqtada al-Sadr as a rabble rousing firebrand cleric. Indeed, it seems that for Cockburn, if only they had recognized that Muqtada al-Sadr was an astute and rather cautious politician and, as a consequence, had made greater efforts to integrate him within the post-Saddam political settlement, the Americans could have avoided many of their blunders that has left Iraq in such a poor state after five years of US occupation.

On the other hand, Cockburn presents Muqtada al-Sadr as a messianic leader of the poor and oppressed of Iraq who has implacably opposed US imperialism. Of course, it is this later aspect of Cockburn's argument that the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and their allies like to emphasize.

Against those who would argue that the policy of the Stop the War Coalition (StWC) of holding big national marches against the war every six months has failed, the SWP

has repeatedly cited the example of the Vietnam war. They point out that large protests in the USA, and elsewhere in the west, combined with the 'armed resistance of the Vietnam people' not only eventually ended the war, but struck a major blow against US imperialism. As a consequence, the SWP have been eager to identify a popular resistance movement in Iraq and offer their unconditional support. At the beginning of 2005, shortly after the destruction of Fallujah, the SWP's monthly magazine *Socialist Review* carried an enthusiastic article about the rise of the 'national resistance in Iraq' by Anne Alexander and Simon Assaf. In the conclusion they wrote:

The struggle to end the occupation in Iraq is a fight for national liberation in the tradition of the revolt of 1920. What began as sporadic attacks on the occupying forces has developed into a deep-rooted popular insurgency, the basic aims of which are supported by the majority of Iraqis. Neither the lack of a single organisation to act as the voice of the resistance, as the FSLN did in Algeria or the PLO in Palestine, nor the insurgency's Islamic colouring should change the attitude of socialists towards it. We oppose the occupation and support Iraqis in their struggle for national liberation.

They then go on to write:

Our solidarity with the Iraqi struggle against the occupation is all the more important because history shows that, although it is possible for a guerrilla movement to defeat imperialist powers, they can only do so if the military campaign creates a political crisis for the occupying power. The National Liberation Front in Vietnam fought bravely, but could not achieve military victory against vastly better armed US forces.³⁶

At that time the SWP was prepared to extend unconditional support to all those fighting the occupation with the exception of al-Qaida, who could be dismissed as being largely a marginal force.

However, as we have seen, by the time this article was published any hopes of a unified resistance to the occupation had already been shattered by Muqtada al-Sadr's adoption of the collaborationist strategy of both al-Sistani and the UIA. By 2006 Iraq the mere 'Islamic colouring of the Iraq insurgency' had lead to virtual sectarian war between militias. The SWP's response to such an outcome was threefold; firstly it sought to place all the blame for the sectarian killings on the Americans, secondly it sought to divert attention from what the sectarianism of the supposed 'national liberation movement' was doing in Iraq by claiming that the US was about to bomb Iran, and thirdly, by narrowing down what they thought constituted the genuine national resistance. Whereas before they had stopped short of endorsing al-Qaida, now the SWP considered the entire 'Sunni insurgency' as beyond the pale.³⁷ For them the only true national resistance now was that of Muqtada al-Sadr.

³⁶ *Socialist Review*, January 2005.

³⁷ Of course, the irony is that al-Qaida has been the only armed insurgent group to consistently fight the US occupation. According to their own logic the SWP should support Al-Qaida.

³⁵ See 'The Mahdi army: New tactics for a new stage', Fadhil Ali, *Terrorism Monitor*, June 28 2008.

As a result, representatives of the Sadrist movement have been invited to speak at StWC rallies to much applause. Sadrists have been given space to write articles in the *Socialist Review*, free of any editorial comment or reply; while the *Socialist Worker* has carried uncritical, and indeed quite enthusiastic, reports of the actions and statements of the Sadrist movement and Muqtada al-Sadr in Iraq.

Of course, supporting rather unsavoury anti-working class and anti-socialist movements on the grounds that they are in some sense anti-imperialist is nothing new for the SWP. As good Leninists, they are quite prepared to subordinate the class struggle to the immediate struggle against imperialism. Certainly since the end of the second world war, Leninists of various stripes have argued that the economic and political dominance of the imperialist nations has not only blocked economic development of the 'oppressed countries of the third world', but has also provided the material and ideological basis for social imperialism at home, which has ensured that reformism has dominated the labour movements in the imperialist countries. By overthrowing the domination of imperialism, national liberation movements open the way for the national accumulation of capital in their own countries. In doing so, it is argued, they will swell the ranks of the world's proletariat. At the same time, victory for national liberation movements undermines the material basis of social imperialism amongst the working class in the imperialist countries. Thus, it is claimed, in the long term, supporting anti-imperialist national liberation movements serves the long term interests of proletarian revolution on a world scale.

Of course, we would say such arguments have always been rather dubious. However, even many Leninists and others on the anti-imperialist left, including at one time the SWP themselves, recognize that political Islam cannot in anyway be considered an 'anti-imperialist' force. Indeed political Islam can be seen as an ideological form that has arisen from the failure of national liberation movements attempts to break from the dominance of the imperialist powers. Indeed, as we have seen, attempts by Cockburn and the SWP to construe Muqtada al-Sadr as a leader of a national liberation movement do not stand up to close scrutiny.

However, as always, for the SWP opportunism is more important any attempt to defend to any outdated Leninist dogma. In order to maintain the hysterical optimism amongst its foot soldiers necessary to mobilize yet another march up and down the hill the SWP requires a heroic resistance in Iraq. As a consequence, the SWP has been eager to promote Cockburn's book lauding Muqtada al-Sadr.

However, there still remains a bit of a problem for the SWP in promoting Muqtada al-Sadr. This is evident in the otherwise excited review of Cockburn's book in the *Socialist Review*. Of course, the reviewer is unable to accept Cockburn's rather pessimistic conclusion regarding the current situation in Iraq. But also, quite revealingly, she cannot quite accept Cockburn's rendition of the blatant Sadrist propaganda regarding the history of the opposition to Saddam Hussein:

For Cockburn, declining support for the secular opposition forces – such as the Communists – was largely a reaction by Shia Iraqis to the increasingly sectarian behaviour of the state. Other accounts of the same period provide a different perspective, for example,

emphasising the impact of the Communist collaboration with the Ba'athist regime in the 1970s or arguing that the era was marked by the brutal repression of Shia Islamist groups, but not by a general campaign of sectarian persecution.³⁸

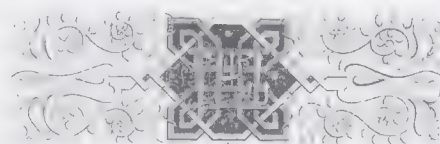
Unlike Cockburn, the SWP are reluctant to fully adopt the Sadrist myth concerning the history of Iraq since this would mean abandoning their own Marxist account. By touting Cockburn's book to the anti-war movement, the SWP can promote support for Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist movement without actually giving a complete and unequivocal endorsement themselves. They can retain their own identity as the 'radical Marxist wing' of the anti-war movement, while at the same time promoting the supposedly anti-imperialist credentials of political Islam and Muqtada al-Sadr.

Conclusion

Cockburn's book provides a wealth of evidence and information on what has happened in Iraq following the US invasion in 2003. However, as we have seen, its interpretation of the situation in Iraq is fundamentally flawed by his acceptance of the notion that Iraq is to be understood primarily in terms of age-old ethnic and sectarian divisions. Indeed, as we have seen, his notion that Muqtada al-Sadr is the true representative of the long oppressed Shia of Iraq is simply Sadrist propaganda.

The situation in Iraq is certainly bleak. Years of war, sanctions and now occupation has led to economic devastation. Most people are mainly concerned with day to day survival and are depoliticized. There has certainly been a revival in religion and a return to old forms and social structures. Yet as Cockburn's Iraqi friends have told him, the sectarian divisions in Iraq have been greatly exaggerated.³⁹ Indeed, what seems to be remarkable is that despite the attempts of the militias like the Mahdi army to impose by force of arms sectarian divisions in Iraq many Iraqis reject sectarianism. With widespread revulsion at the gangsterism of militias there is perhaps a glimmer of hope in Iraq.

There is in Iraq, as in neighbouring Iran, a long communist tradition. This tradition may be currently small and marginalized yet it still exists and is organized. Instead of cheerleading the likes of Muqtada al-Sadr and promoting political Islam, it is to these communist currents that we must look and back their slogan '*neither the occupation nor political Islam*'.



³⁸ *Socialist Review* May 2008.

³⁹ Cockburn admits that many of his Iraqi friends complain that foreign journalists like himself greatly exaggerate the sectarian divisions in Iraq and point to the fact that Sunni and Shia have lived side by side for centuries and are often intermarried. Cockburn dismisses such complaints on the grounds that his Shia friends are hostile to Ba'athists while his Sunni friends are hostile to the Iranian links of the Shia parties. See p. 207.

Capitalism and spectacle

Review article: The Retort Collective's *Afflicted Powers*



The Retort collective's¹ book *Afflicted Powers – Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* was first published in 2005, after having started life as a broadsheet (entitled *Neither Their War Nor Their Peace*) produced for distribution at the anti-war demonstrations of 2003. Its title derives from Milton's *Paradise Lost*: Satan, cast down to hell and defeated after the war in heaven, rallies his troops and calls for a council of war:

*And reassembling our afflicted Powers,
Consult how we may henceforth most offend
Our Enemy, our own loss how repair;
How overcome this dire Calamity,
What reinforcement we may gain from Hope,
If not what resolution from despair.*²

The book constitutes an attempt to take stock of the global political situation in the light of the anti-war movement's dissipation; to set out the scale and nature of the tasks implied by opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and to thus address the reasons for that movement's failure. However – if we adopt for the moment Retort's own trope of a council of war – this would seem to be a strategic analysis that not only fails to describe the terrain upon which battle is to be rejoined, but which also fails to identify the combatants themselves: Retort stress that if the anti-war movement is to have any hope of success it must understand that opposition to the war implies an opposition to capital, and yet they fail to offer anything beyond a highly abstract account of quite what capital is, what it does, and therefore how it might be challenged. Throughout the book capital is presented as a malign and independent entity, existing in its own right. Its nature as a social relation is thus obscured, and this results in a failure to deal with class antagonism and consequently with opposition to capitalism. For a book that presents itself as a

contribution towards that opposition this would seem to be something of a problem.

So, why are we bothering to review it? The answer is that Retort's use³ of Guy Debord's concept of spectacle merits a response. *The Society of the Spectacle* was first published over forty years ago, but *Afflicted Powers* is nonetheless symptomatic of its abiding influence; in this respect Retort's book provides us with a prompt to consider whether the theory of spectacle really does offer practical insights into the current political context.

Our approach to this question is informed by the following observations. The Situationist International (S.I.) were revolutionary activists, and as Debord himself stated, *The Society of the Spectacle* 'was written with the deliberate intention of doing harm to spectacular society.'⁴ Nonetheless, the assimilation of their work into art theory and academia has been continuing apace for almost three decades now; having been simplified and neutered into a crude form of media theory Debord's work is now often included within university courses, and both he and the S.I. have become canonised into the pantheon of art history.⁵ In view of the supposed connection between Situationist ideas and activism, it would thus seem relevant to ask the following: to what extent does Debord's theory render itself amendable to such 'recuperation'? Is it really the case that the dangerous, radical truth of his account necessitates its sanitisation and incorporation into the spectacle (as he himself held) – or is it rather the case that it was, from the outset, no more than an 'image' of the theoretical critique that it claimed to provide?

Afflicted Powers stresses the importance of images and appearances in contemporary politics, and yet, as we argue here, it fails to get past the most immediate, superficial

1 Retort describe themselves as 'a gathering of some thirty or forty antagonists of the present order of things' (Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, Verso, 2006, p.xi), four of whom – Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Mathews and Michael Watts – wrote the majority of the book.

2 Ibid. p.vii.

3 Their readiness to use Debord's work was no doubt exacerbated by the fact that one of their number – T.J. Clark – was once a member of the Situationist International's short-lived English section.

4 Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Zone Books, New York, 1995, p. 10

5 So much so that Debord and Vaneigem's names are currently emblazoned across the walls of the Tate Modern, incorporated into a painted lineage of modern art.

appearances of capitalist social relations. Our enquiry, therefore, is as to the extent to which the same can be said for Debord's own work. In order to pursue that question, our own text aims to move from the superficial to the foundational: we begin with Retort's banal concern with media and communications technologies, and by questioning the theoretical concepts that underpin it we arrive at a consideration of the notion of praxis (the translation of ideas into action) upon which Debord's oeuvre is based. Although we reach this material by way of the failings of Debord's theory of spectacle – and although we argue that the notion of spectacle is in fact a theoretical dead end, and of little practical interest today – we do, nonetheless, suggest that the ideas that it rests upon remain interesting and pertinent.

This article thus moves through a series of stages. First, we describe Retort's book, the version of spectacle that they employ, and the political and theoretical problems that this implies. We then move to Debord, and describe the aspects of his theory that rendered it amenable and suited to Retort's implicitly liberal outlook. Having identified these issues, we then consider them in greater theoretical detail, paying particular attention to the theory's relation to class struggle. After establishing Debord and the S.I.'s departure from a classically envisaged notion of class and social production, we then look at Debord's problematic relation to Marx's economics; and through considering the ideas attendant to his claim that "for Marx it is the *struggle* – and by no means the *law* – that has to be understood",⁶ we consider his notion of 'historical thought', and thereby the ideas about time, subjectivity and the relation between theory and practice that underlie his work. Finally, in outlining this notion of praxis we introduce its correlation with his fascination with military theory and strategy; and in this respect we return in our conclusion to Retort's own opening metaphor of a strategic analysis.



1) Debord's theory of spectacle

In order to present these claims, however, we should of course begin with a very brief sketch of Debord's theory. Perhaps the first thing that should be noted is that the concept of spectacle originated in relation to art and cultural criticism;⁷ it began to coalesce in the early sixties, after the

formation of the S.I. in 1957, but Debord had been employing the term since the mid 50s as a means of describing the separation of bourgeois art and culture from everyday life. It quickly developed into a definition of the passivity and inadequacy of society as a whole, and in so doing became steadily more involved and reliant upon Marxist theory. However, as we will argue here, even in its completely developed form the concept retains an overwhelming emphasis on culture, and thus (ironically enough) on the more superficial appearances of society rather than on its concrete production.

The fully developed form of Debord's spectacle is based upon Marx's account of alienation: in working for capital rather than for themselves, Marx claimed, workers were separated and estranged (alienated) from their productive activity and from the results of their labour. Further, according to Marx, value – and thus capital – is separated, alienated labour, and as such the proletariat were described as being enslaved by their own alienated power. This state of affairs was said to be hidden by the 'commodity fetish', the attribution of human qualities to commodities: although value derives from labour, when commodities are related to one another in exchange their values appear as their own intrinsic properties. The labour relations of human subjects thus appear as attributes of the objects that they produce.

Debord's development of Marx's account was greatly influenced by the work of Georg Lukács, who argued in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) that the drive for efficiency in the work process had extended beyond the factory walls. For Lukács, the whole of society had become regulated, measured and recorded in order to facilitate the operation of capitalism. Human subjects were reduced to the status of objects, whilst commodity production and exchange shaped history as if capital itself was a human subject. The commodity fetish was thus said to dominate consciousness, entailing that capitalist society was possessed of a purely 'contemplative attitude' (i.e. an alienated detachment) towards its own history.

For Debord, writing in post-war, newly rebuilt and seemingly Americanized France, this 'contemplative attitude' had reached its complete expression in the saturation of modern society with images celebrating the commodity (adverts, fads, fashions, media, etc.). The alienation underpinning society was thus exemplified in the relation between passive, disconnected observers and visual imagery extolling the virtues of a world shaped by capitalism. Consequently, the 'image' was taken to be the defining concept of all modern alienation. This means that the theory of spectacle is not solely concerned with visual phenomena and communications technologies, as is sometimes supposed. Simply put, Debord's 'images' are representations of a direct and autonomous connection with the creation of one's own history, and thereby that of society as a whole. As all experience and autonomy had been surrendered to capital life had become a mere image of itself, and as such human beings had become mere 'spectators' of their own lives.

6 Op. Cit. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 52.

7 The notion of spectacle arose from the S.I.'s theory of cultural 'decomposition', which itself derived from ideas developed by Isidore Isou's Letterist movement (a group that Debord was a member of prior to the inception of the S.I.). Bourgeois culture was said to be in a state of decay; it was defunct, having outlived its function in the process of human development, and now existed in a state of empty, vacuous self-referentiality and repetition (when expanding upon these themes Debord was effectively describing postmodernism as early as the 1950s). History was ready to move on, and yet there remained a delay in instituting a revolutionary

moment that would realise the possibilities dormant within it; "suffice it to say," Debord wrote in 1956, "that in our view the premises for revolution...are not only ripe, they have begun to rot." (Debord, Guy, and Wolman, Gil, 'A User's Guide to Détournement', in Knabb, Ken (ed.) *Situationist International Anthology*, Bureau of Public Secrets, Berkeley, 2006, p.14)



2) Retort's version of the spectacle

In contrast with Debord, Retort are chiefly concerned with using the idea of spectacle to stress the predominance and significance of visual imagery, media and communications technologies within modern society. In this regard it's worth indicating here that Debord himself stated in *The Society of the Spectacle* that the spectacle "cannot be understood as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the mass dissemination of images",⁸ and described the "mass media" as the spectacle's "most stultifyingly superficial manifestation."⁹ Largely unconcerned with the sense in which the theory of spectacle describes alienated social activity, Retort thus arrive at a superficial version of spectacle well suited to their interest in its 'superficial manifestations'. Claiming that modern social practice has become increasingly reliant upon such media and imagery, they argue that although the spectacle's mechanisms (which, for Retort, essentially means communications technologies) once ensured docility, they are now able to be used against the state. This, they claim, is what took place with the destruction of the World Trade Centre on September 11th 2001: a symbolically significant target was destroyed, 'the perpetual emotion machines' were 'captured for a moment',¹⁰ and on them appeared what they describe as an 'image defeat': a blow suffered by spectacular society on the 'terrain' of the spectacle itself. This, they claim, provided an ideological prompt and alibi for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But what does this actually tell us? Little more than that the media exerts an ideological effect; a claim that is at best banal, and at worst entirely superficial. Consequently, rather than pursuing these aspects of Retort's account we concern ourselves with the version of spectacle that underlies these assertions. In order to get to it, however, we will need to unpick it from the confused knot of ideas and theories that Retort present us with; and this it seems is best achieved by approaching it by way of two further concepts: 'military neo-liberalism' (a construct of Retort's own invention), and 'primitive accumulation' (a term first employed by Marx to describe the constitution of capitalist social relations). We describe both in what follows, and begin with the former.

Taking issue with the popular 'blood for oil' credo, Retort write that the Iraq war was not motivated solely by the desire for oil, but that it was rather an attempt to further a neo-liberal free-market agenda:

What the Iraq adventure represents is less a war for oil than a radical, punitive, 'extra-economic' restructuring

of the conditions necessary for expanded profitability – paving the way, in short, for a new round of American-led dispossession and capital accumulation. ...It was intended as the prototype of a new form of military neo-liberalism. Oil was especially visible at this moment of extra-economic imposition because, as it turned out, oil revenues were key to the planning and financing of the military exercise itself, and to the reconstruction of the Iraqi 'emerging market'.¹¹

This recourse to force was motivated, they claim, by resistance to that neo-liberal agenda. Retort maintain that the problems brought about by globalisation became increasingly apparent from the late 1990's onwards, and although they admit to a degree of uncertainty (quite 'what precise constellation of forces began to put this methodology in question is still open to debate'¹²) they list a series of examples and causes. These include popular awareness of third world debt, 'cracks' in the 'World Bank establishment', scepticism towards unfettered markets and resistance to trade subsidies. The result was a new-found readiness to employ force in the creation of capitalist opportunities:

This is the proper frame, we believe, for understanding what has happened in Iraq. It is only as part of this neo-liberal firmament, in which a dominant capitalist core begins to find it harder and harder to benefit from 'consensus' market expansion or corporate mergers and asset transfers, that the new preference for the military option makes sense. Military neo-liberalism seems to us a useful shorthand for the new reality; but in a sense the very prefix 'neo' concedes too much to the familiar capitalist rhetoric of renewal. For military neo-liberalism is no more than primitive accumulation in (thin) disguise.¹³

So, 'military neo-liberalism' is according to Retort a form of 'primitive accumulation'. As such, in order to explain and evaluate Retort's claims further we should first outline Marx's original presentation of this concept.

For Marx, primitive accumulation was a historical process that led to the formation of a class of individuals devoid of the means of reproducing themselves independently of capitalist production: a process through which the means of production became concentrated in the hands of a capitalist class, to whom the newly formed proletariat were 'free' – by virtue of having been 'liberated' from the possibility of independence¹⁴ – to sell their labour power for a wage. In describing how arable lands held in common by the rural working class (relics from the feudal past, in which the peasantry were allocated land to feed themselves in return for working for their lord) were cleared, broken up and parcelled out to industrialists and capitalist farmers, Marx concludes Volume 1 of *Capital* with a historical demonstration of the book's theoretical claims: capitalism is shown to be reliant upon the exploitation of labour, and thus upon ensuring that there is a working class that has no other option than to work in capitalist production.

¹¹ Ibid. p.72

¹² Ibid. p.74

¹³ Ibid. p.74

¹⁴ Marx thus plays on the ideology of individual liberty and free exchange associated with capitalist exchange relations.

⁸ Op. Cit. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 12

⁹ Ibid. p. 19

¹⁰ Op. Cit. Retort, p. 26

Above all, Marx stresses here that capital is not a thing, nor the property of a thing, but rather a social relation mediated by things (i.e. by commodities). To put it extremely crudely: if I steal things from you, for example, I don't automatically have capital; I just have your things. I only have capital if I have the means of creating a greater amount of value than that which I already possess; and as for Marx the source of value is social labour, in order to create more value I must not only have a market in which I can sell finished articles, but also a) means of production, and b) a workforce to use them. In fact, to ensure that I have such a workforce, I and other capitalists must have sole access to the means of production: it must be the case that the only way in which our workforce can meet their own needs of subsistence is through working for us. If they were able to produce that which they need to survive without us they would of course have no reason to do so. Capitalism, Marx claims, is reliant upon property relations based around the expropriation of the workforce and the concentration of the means of production in the hands of a capitalist class.

For Retort, however, primitive accumulation simply means creating the conditions amenable to capital's growth, and the abstract manner with which they describe this is directly related to their disinterest in the social relations that underpin capitalism. Primitive accumulation is presented chiefly in terms of dispossession, although not in the sense of creating a proletarian class; rather, it simply seems to mean creating conditions in which wealth can be appropriated (in the terms of the example given above, 'stealing your things'). Now, if – as Retort claim – capitalism is reliant upon a perpetual process of primitive accumulation, then according to this version of the concept it must be perpetually reliant upon the existence and availability of wealth and property that can be plundered. Rather than depending upon production, Retort present capital as requiring the immediate (i.e. the sudden, mysterious) existence of the *results* of production; and rather than relying on an expropriated proletarian class of workers, capital seems instead to rely upon a struggle to amass wealth, fought out between property owners.

Not only does this constitute what Marx would have termed a bourgeois perspective (i.e. a view limited to the sphere of commodity exchange and ignorant of that of production). In addition, it entails that capital is presented here as a force that exists separately and independently from an equally abstracted and classless 'humanity', and not as a social relation.¹⁵ This becomes particularly apparent when

15 One of the issues that this review has been unable to explore, chiefly through a lack of space, is the theoretical debt that Retort owe to Italian Autonomist thought. As has been argued extensively in previous issues of *Aufheben*, Autonomia has a tendency to focus upon class struggle and to ignore the social relations from which it arises; the result is an abstract notion of capital and struggle, and a disconnection between capital and its real basis in social relations. The shotgun wedding that Retort enforce between Autonomia and Debord is rendered possible by the fact that both suffer from an inability to deal with those social relations in any real depth. We have argued that these issues constitute a major failing in Autonomist ever since our very first critical engagement with it in *Aufheben* #3, where we offered a critique of Midnight Notes' Midnight Oil – Work, Energy, War (see also our response to a reply made by one of that text's authors in *Aufheben* #5). In this respect it's pertinent to note that According to Retort Midnight Notes' book 'remains an absolutely foundational text for any understanding of the current conjuncture' (op. Cit. Retort, p.71).

we look at the relation between this version of primitive accumulation and Retort's notions of military neo-liberalism and spectacle, as it underlies the problems in their use of Debord's work.

The current global political context, they claim, is based upon the creation of capital's necessary conditions through their forced, militarised imposition, and through the more subtle violence of the spectacle's construction and maintenance of docile consumer subjectivities ('Primitive accumulation', they write, 'means...an armed struggle impelled by, and continuing to be fought in, that complex of circumstances we call spectacle.'¹⁶ But because Retort view capital as an abstract entity in its own right, and thus ignore issues of production, the spectacle and the operation of capital as a whole are pictured as alien forces imposed upon society, and not as the result of the social relations that compose it. This leads to an inherently abstract view that fails to identify the true nature of capitalism or indeed the of antagonism that underlies it.

As an aside: we might think back here to Retort's analogy of a council of war. As we suggested in the introduction, this is a strategic analysis that not only fails to identify the terrain upon which conflict is to take place, but also the combatants themselves.

The abstraction of this presentation is informed by the importance that Retort attribute to the 'enclosure' of the 'commons'. Again, these are terms that relate to Marx's description of primitive accumulation, which as we noted described the transformation of common land into private property. Many recent implementations of the concept of primitive accumulation have had much to say about the 'commons', often using the term to refer to areas of life that are independent (or potentially independent) from capital. Following Hardt and Negri's claims in *Empire*,¹⁷ Retort describe capital's invasion of the commons as taking place both 'intensively' and 'extensively': it expands 'extensively' by advancing into new territories, and 'intensively' by moulding human subjectivity in accordance with its own requirements. As regards the 'extensive' process it would thus seem – if the Iraq war was, as Retort claim, a form of primitive accumulation – that Iraqi markets and industry are, bizarrely enough, a form of commons; and as regards the 'intensive' process, Retort picture the spectacle as a form of enclosure forced upon a separate, otherwise 'natural' and classless 'humanity':

The spectacle...is not merely a realm of images: it is a social process – a complex of enforcements and exclusions... [It] is...a form of violence – a repeated

16 Ibid. p.186

17 For Hardt and Negri, 'primitive accumulation is not a process that happens once and then is done with; rather, capitalist relations of production and social classes have to be reproduced continually.' (Hardt, Michael, and Negri, Antonio, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, London, 2000, p. 258). This process, they claim, now takes place through the structuring of everyday life and subjectivity. Afflicted Powers is in fact greatly influenced by Hardt and Negri's book, and although it incorporates a somewhat obtuse critique of their claims (Retort imply that Negri's immaterial labour should be understood as spectacle), its account essentially bolts Debord onto Negri's own classless model. The very fact that Debord's work can be incorporated (albeit poorly) into Negri's is thus an illustration of the amenability to recuperation which we seek to investigate here. See *Aufheben* #14 for a detailed discussion of the theoretical failings in Negri's account.

action against real human possibilities, real (meaning flexible, usable, transformable) representations, real attempts at collectivity.”¹⁸

The spectacle, for Retort, is essentially a form of ideological primitive accumulation. It is a form of violence imposed upon human subjectivity that serves to mask, sanitise and render acceptable the brutality of capital's true nature. But 'when a particular node of the spectacle enters into crisis,' which is what Retort claim occurred with the attacks of September 11th 2001, 'it is precisely the violence of [capital] that comes into view.'¹⁹ Playing on Mao's famous aphorism, Retort write that 'Ultimately, the spectacle comes out of the barrel of a gun. State power informs and enforces it. Mostly that fact is hidden. The spectacle is that hiding.'²⁰ This is the basis for their tentative claims as to the radical possibilities inherent within a movement that opposes the conflicts prompted by those attacks: if primitive accumulation is the violent imposition of capital's requirements, and if capitalist modernity is underpinned by primitive accumulation, it follows that Retort should view the movement against the Iraq war (which they understand as having been conducted for imperialist expansion whilst prompted and ideologically validated by issues of spectacle) as implicitly grasping the true nature of both capital and spectacle.

This is, however, an entirely vacuous claim. Capital is supposedly reliant upon primitive accumulation, and yet their version of this concept – and by extension their understanding of capital – has no bearing on social relations. The call to arms that Retort bring to their council of war is thus an invitation to try and punch a cloud, for as a result of their disinterest in capital's basis in class antagonism they are singularly unable to name quite what might oppose it, and indeed how it might be confronted.



3) Debord's theory and its compatibility with Retort's perspective

We now move to consider the extent to which the failings in Retort's account mirror some of the themes and issues in Debord's own writings. In doing so, we aim to provide a contextual basis for the critique that we offer in the subsequent section.

Retort's presentation of the spectacle as something that is separate from humanity and effectively imposed upon it from 'outside' marks their divergence from Debord, who was at pains to stress that 'The spectacle cannot be set in abstract

opposition to concrete social activity.'²¹ However, Debord's notion of 'social activity' is not the same thing as wage labour, and in introducing this issue we indicate the extent to which the focus of his analysis was not the relations of production *per se*, but rather the construction of the behaviour, experience and subjectivities – in short, the life – of society as a whole. It is in this respect that Debord's work transformed Marx's concern with the production of commodities into the production of life in the abstract.

However, having stated that Debord expands the relations of commodity production into the production of social life, we should clarify that he did not (as is sometimes supposed²²) transform the commodity into the 'image'. Rather, the spectacle is 'a *moment* of the development of commodity production',²³ a moment at which 'the commodity completes its colonization of social life.'²⁴ For Debord, the alienation of society's powers and capacities was not specific to capitalism; such alienation had taken a host of forms throughout history (e.g. religion, hierarchy etc.), but with society's complete submission to and reconfiguration by the economy it had reached its complete and most extreme expression. As we will see, this view of modern society as constituting the very apex of such separation (expressed in the dichotomous relation between image and observer) was linked to the assumption that its revolutionary supersession was immanent.

For Debord, the context of the 1950s and 1960s demonstrated that the time was ripe for the emergence of a new form of human life. The civil rights, anti-Vietnam war and student movements of the 1960s all indicated the desire to move away from an old, inadequate society. At the same time Soviet Russia, the apparent impotence and collusion of the unions and the relatively recent suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 indicated just how defunct and inadequate the options for change offered by the old order really were. The central chapter of *The Society of the Spectacle* is in fact a condemnation of the 'collapse' of the workers' movement into its Soviet representation, and a celebration of its return in the supposedly spontaneous struggles and disparate movements of its era.²⁵ And, despite Debord's deliberate adoption of a cold and impersonal style,

21 Op. Cit. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p.4

22 Anselm Jappe's *Guy Debord* (University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1999) is by far the best theoretical text on Debord, and is strongly recommended to anyone interested in reading Debord as a revolutionary theorist. It does however contain problematic elements, such as the somewhat misleading assertion that 'Debord's use of the terms 'image' and 'spectacle' should be understood as an extension of Marx's idea of the commodity-form.' (p.19) This is incorrect, or is at best poorly phrased: the image is not a direct extension of the commodity, but is rather a means of defining the essential nature of a society completely in thrall to a commodity based economy.

23 Situationist International, 'How Not to Understand Situationist Books' (first printed in *Internationale Situationniste* #12, 1969), in Op. Cit. Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology* p. 341

24 Op. Cit. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p.29

25 'The fourth [chapter]...which holds the principal place in the book, rehearses [reprendre] the preceding historical movement (always going from the abstract to the concrete) as the history of the revolutionary workers' movement. It is a summary of the failure of the proletarian revolution, and of its return. It opens onto the question of the revolutionary organization.' Debord, Guy, Letter to the Italian Section of the S.I., 27th May 1969, available at <http://www.notbored.org/debord-27May1969.html>

18 Op. Cit. Retort, p. 131

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

his tone is almost euphoric at times: history, he thought, signalled by the movements, protests and riots of the 60s, was about to reappear. Unsurprisingly, one year after the book's publication, Debord was all too happy to read the events of May 1968 as the practical verification of his theoretical work.

It is in this sense that Debord's apparently bleak account carries a note of triumph: if alienation had reached its apogee in the world of the spectacle, then surely its revolutionary denouement must be immanent. This assumption was based upon a particular understanding of modern consumer society: according to Debord and the S.I., although a wage-based economy had ensured the means of survival in the past, society's technical advances and the possibilities offered by automation meant that it was no longer a requirement. As a result, capital had been forced to continually invent new reasons for its own necessity:

[The] constant expansion of economic power in the form of commodities transformed human labour itself into a commodity, into *wage labour*, and ultimately produced a level of abundance sufficient to solve the initial problem of survival — but only in such a way that the same problem is continually being regenerated at a higher level.²⁶

'In these circumstances,' Debord claimed, 'an abundance of commodities, which is to say an abundance of commodity relations, can be no more than an *augmented survival*.'²⁷ His claim was that however numbed people might be by its banal trinkets, capitalism could never master their desires; all it could do was attempt to satisfy them with more commodities, the increasing abundance of which was said to be inversely proportional to their ability to satisfy. The expansion of capital was thus one with that of the drive to supersede it. Consequently, humanity was effectively poised to 'wake up': 'By the time society discovers that it is contingent on the economy, the economy has in point of fact become contingent on society. ...Where economic id was, there ego shall be.'²⁸



The important issue here is Debord and the S.I.'s assumption that revolution would be driven by an abundance of the means of survival, and not by their deprivation. This position was taken partly in response to the debate, prevalent at the time (and still present today) as to the extent to which that abundance had eradicated the need and desire for radical social change. For the S.I., this new found wealth merely indicated that the material poverty of the 19th century had evolved into a deeper, more existential poverty of meaning. It is in this sense that Vaneigem asked rhetorically:

Where on earth can the proletariat be? Spirited away?
Gone underground? Or has it been put in a museum?

26 Op. Cit. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p.28

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid. p. 34

...We hear from some quarters that the proletariat no longer exists, that it has disappeared forever under an avalanche of sound systems, TVs, small cars and planned communities. Others denounce this as a sleight of hand and indignantly point out a few remaining workers whose low wages and wretched conditions do undeniably evoke the nineteenth century.²⁹

The answer, in Debord's own words, was that 'the generalized separation of worker and product...leads to the *proletarianization of the world*.'³⁰ Poverty now took the form of a lack of autonomy and self-determination, and as in spectacular society all experience and action were in thrall to the spectacle the 'new proletariat' was 'tending to encompass everybody.'³¹ The traditional Marxist programme of taking control over the means of production had effectively become the need to take control over the means of making one's own life, i.e. applying the means and possibilities offered by society's technical advance in the construction of 'situations': moments of life designed, lived and experienced according to the subject's own wishes³². Anticipating our later comments on Debord's focus on time somewhat, and indeed our discussion of his problematic relation to Marx, we can note here that the drive to supersede present society was essentially motivated by a desire to take charge of one's own history, and to thus consciously determine one's experience of time. This, according to Debord, was the essential truth of all revolutionary movements in the past, regardless of the extent to which they might have been driven by comparatively humble and more explicitly material demands. For example, claiming that 'the worker, at the base of society' is ultimately responsible for giving rise to that society's (alienated) history, Debord wrote that:

By demanding to *live* the historical time that it creates, the proletariat discovers the simple, unforgettable core of its revolutionary project; and every attempt to carry this project through — though all up to now have gone down to defeat — signals a possible point of departure for a new historical life.³³

Or, to quote Vaneigem: 'one might say that radical revolutionary currents are inspired by one unchanging project: the project of being a whole man, a will to live totally which Marx was the first to provide with scientific tactics.'³⁴ We will return to this notion of Marx's 'scientific' status later, and indeed to the issue of 'tactics', and might now sum up the S.I.'s conception of the proletariat with the following. 'We are presently witnessing a reshuffling of the cards of class struggle,' they wrote; 'a struggle which has certainly not disappeared, but whose lines of battle have been

29 Vaneigem, Raoul, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Rebel Press, London, 2003, pp. 67-8

30 Op. Cit. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 21

31 Situationist International, 'The Bad Days Will End' (first published in *Internationale Situationniste* # 7, 1962), in Op. Cit. Knabb

32 The situation arose from Debord and the S.I.'s early concern with superseding the separation and decomposition of bourgeois culture. Simply put, art would be realised as life itself through shaping experience according to subjective desire.

33 Op. Cit. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p.106

34 Op. Cit. Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, p. 68

somehow altered from the old schema.³⁵

In the context of the reality presently beginning to take shape, we may consider as proletarians all people who have no possibility of altering the space-time that society allots to them... The rulers are those who organise this space-time, or at least have a significant margin of personal choice.³⁶

This model effectively transforms wealth into qualitative experience and self-determination, class into an abstraction, and the wage relation into something even vaguer. All social practice was thus a form of 'labour' appropriated by a vaguely defined minority of 'rulers', and subsequently 'sold' back in the commodified form of 'augmented survival'. We can thus begin to see the extent to which Debord transforms the wage relation (the alienation of labour-power and its exchange for a wage) into the 'production' and 'consumption' of human life itself.

This can be illustrated by way of the following. Having claimed that 'The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life',³⁷ Debord equates that life to 'the entirety of labour sold',³⁸ i.e. to the total activity of society. This becomes 'the total commodity',³⁹ figured as not just the concrete, material results of production, i.e. commodities themselves, but rather as all reified and 'rationalised' forms of behaviour. The entirety of social activity thus stands as a separated totality from which individual subjects are divorced, and which they merely 'spectate'. Comprising the result, activity and *raison d'être* of a mode of life completely governed by the commodity, the spectacle thus comprises a representation of life; a life lived in accordance with the demands of an alien power, and which the acting subject is inherently alienated from. This concern with the whole of life, and not just the sphere of economics, is one with Debord's move away from a notion of class to a conception of humanity as a generality.

This of course recalls the problems that we identified in Retort's account, the distinction being that where Retort present capital and spectacle as complete abstractions Debord grounds them in social activity. However, his account lends itself to their bourgeois liberalism by virtue of the abstract manner in which he conceives production; for as we have seen, his theory is 1) based upon a kind of existentialism which – despite its virtues, which we return to below – implies the need to liberate human life as a generality; 2) deliberately replaces class antagonism with an abstract confrontation between those who want to maintain and those who want to change the existing order; and 3) in doing so transforms the wage relation into an entirely abstract notion of the production of social life as a whole. If we think back to the previous section, where we saw that for Retort capital is an abstraction that seems to be imposed upon all individuals equally (and thus not a set of social relations that force one class to work for another), it might now seem

reasonable to conclude that it is these aspects of Debord's account that rendered the theory of spectacle so attractive to them.

In the next section we begin to engage with Debord's work in greater depth, and enquire as to the reasons behind this abstraction; and this, we suggest, lies in the extent to which his view of capitalism suffers from a distinct bias towards focussing upon its subjective effects, and thus upon the circulation and consumption of commodities rather than their concrete production. This, we argue here, is greatly informed by the influence that Lukács exerted upon his work.⁴⁰ Through presenting a critique of these issues we establish the extent to which Debord's theory is open to the same complaint that we levelled against Retort above: namely, that of providing an account of capital's appearances that fails to move beyond them.



4) Theoretical problems within Debord's account

In the sketch of Debord's theory that we provided at the beginning of this article we described how Marx's alienated worker became, via Lukács' concern with the 'rationalisation' of society, Debord's alienated *society*. In this section we now enquire as to how that change arose, and in doing so we argue that the abstract notion of production that this gives rise to brought with it a failure to theorise class antagonism, and thus opposition to capital. In doing so we set out the claim that Debord's concern with 'images' is intimately bound up with a fetishized view of class struggle, i.e. with a concern with the immediate appearances of that struggle that fails to deal with its concrete basis.

As was noted above, Debord's theory of spectacle developed from a concern with the separation of art and culture from social practice. This soon led to a concern with viewing society as a totality (i.e. as an interrelated, organic whole), and to the claim that it was not just culture but rather the entirety of social practice that had become alienated from its producers. The detachment from art thus became a similarly passive detachment from social life, and in developing these ideas it is of no surprise that Debord would have found Lukács' description of a 'contemplative' society attractive and theoretically useful.⁴¹ The commensurability of

35 Situationist International, 'Ideologies, Classes and the Domination of Nature' (first published in Internationale Situationniste #8, 1963), in Op. Cit. Knabb p.141

36 Ibid.

37 Op. Cit. Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, p. 29

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 In concentrating on the influence of Lukács we omit – for the sake of brevity – that of other writers such as Lefebvre, along with the important issues relating to Debord's reading of Hegel.

41 Lukács' book would also have seemed attractive to Debord by virtue of its notoriety. Lukács disowned History and Class Consciousness after its critique at the hands of Lenin, and having thus been denounced by both the Party and its own author the book achieved a certain fame. Excerpts from the book were translated and published in French from the early 1930s onwards, at the same time that Marx's early and overtly Hegelian Paris Manuscripts were first introduced to a French audience. The manuscripts were also dismissed by the Party, and as such Lukács' book became part of a growing sense in which a Hegelian Marx might be somehow subversive. A reaction against this set in during the 1950s, when the

the two accounts, however, was due to more than the beguiling nature of Lukács' metaphor of 'contemplation': both theories focus far too heavily on circulation, consumption and the subjective effects of capital.

Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* – the text that Debord drew most heavily upon, and in which Lukács provided his description of a 'contemplative' society – is based upon a flawed understanding of Marx's notion of commodity fetishism.⁴² For Lukács, the fetish is essentially an ideological misconception, and alienation is its subjective result. By contrast, for Marx the fetish is by no means a purely conceptual, ideal phenomena: in capitalist society things really do possess the power of human beings. The earth really does give rise to rent in accordance with the fertility of the soil; money in the bank grows on the basis of interest, and machines really do enable profits according to their productivity. To take such phenomena at face value, however, is to ignore the social relations by which they have come to acquire such power, and to develop an awareness of the true nature of these relations requires an acknowledgement of the real process of wage labour.

Because Lukács' account fails to deal with the reality of the wage relation, and is instead based upon its subjective effects, his critique of society's 'contemplative' detachment from its own labour is itself (as he later admitted⁴³) inherently contemplative. His stress on the 'rationalization' of society in accordance with the commodity form (i.e. the *concept* of the commodity) stands in contrast to Marx's concern with the process of commodity *production*; and in moving away from a focus on the wage relation to consider capitalism's subjective effects, Lukács laid the basis for Debord's neglect of economic analysis and class.

By understanding society as a totality united under a single concept (that of the commodity) Lukács felt he would be able to provide a means of dealing with the ideological and cultural phenomena that traditional economic analysis had ignored. Such a method would enable an analyst to identify the true nature of capitalism and its potential supersession as not only located within economic phenomena, but as present throughout the entirety of society. One would thus no longer need to strip away "bourgeois thought" in order to concentrate on economic processes; rather, "ideological" and "economic" problems [would] lose their exclusiveness and merge into one another.⁴⁴

Understanding the commodity form as the general concept under which society was organised was thus, for Lukács, the key to understanding modern capitalism. Holding that 'the commodity-structure' had 'penetrat[ed] society in all its aspects and...remould[ed] it in its own

image,'⁴⁵ he claimed that the quantitative equivalence that it established between qualitatively different things (e.g. X amount of tea = Y amount of iron) had entailed the 'rationalization' of both the worker and the object of his or her labour. Human faculties, labour and ultimately all aspects of society had become broken down into mechanical functions that could be calculated, refined and optimised in order to ease the smooth running of capitalism. Lukács called this process 'reification' – the transformation of human attributes and activities into quantifiable things – and described the commodity fetish as the form of subjective consciousness that arose from this state of affairs: an alienated, contemplative detachment towards one's own activity.

However, alienation for Marx had an objective (i.e. real, concrete, actual) side to it as well as the subjective (i.e. conceptual, ideological) side that Lukács focussed upon. It is not a form of ideology, or something that impinges upon the worker's 'humanity' and 'soul',⁴⁶ but rather part of the real process of wage labour: the sale of labour power is sold as a commodity, the activity of labouring for the purchaser of that commodity, and the production of finished results that the worker has no claim to or direct interest in. For Marx, labour must be alienated (made other to the worker) in order to be bought and sold. Capitalist production thus relies upon the alienation of labour in two respects: firstly, in the sense that the capitalist requires the labour of others to augment the value of his or her capital; and secondly, in that it is the alienation and sale of social labour that renders individual labour interchangeable and socially equivalent, thus giving rise to the equivalence and exchangeability of finished commodities.

Now, if production and circulation depend upon the alienation of labour, then so too does the commodity fetish, which essentially means that the equivalence of commodities in circulation masks the social relations of those who produce them. Put simply, Marx's account of the fetish is as follows: the value of commodities derives from the labour of human beings, but when these commodities are placed in a comparative relation to one another – and when this relation is facilitated by money, the general equivalent – all reference to value's basis in labour is lost, and their value appears to be an innate quality within them. The corollary of this is that the power (the labour, activity and potential) of human subjects presents itself as that of the things that they produce.

Thus, where for Lukács alienation was the fetish's ideological and subjective result, for Marx it was its objective cause. Further, where Marx viewed alienation in terms of the relations of *production*, Lukács viewed it as a result of the quantitative equivalence of commodity *circulation* – and in thus developing a notion of commodity fetishism through Lukács' work, Debord took as his starting point an overriding concern with consumption as well as an abstracted notion of production. We can thus see a theoretical basis for the problems identified in both Debord and Retort's accounts.

This shift from production to circulation underlies Debord's concern with 'images'. Lukács' had attempted to unite social phenomena under the concept of the commodity, and Debord tried to do the same thing with his notion of spectacle ('The concept of the spectacle brings together and

Hegelianism and humanism of 'the Young Marx' came to be attacked by structuralist Marxists such as Althusser. Debord's return to an explicitly Hegelian Marx was thus not only opposed to party dogma, but also to the trends of his day.

42 For a useful discussion of this issue, and for an exposition of the commodity fetish's relation to private property and alienation, see Simon Clarke's *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology – From Adam Smith to Max Weber*, Macmillan, London, 1991.

43 Interest in *History and Class Consciousness* was such that the book was re-published in 1967, despite the protestations of its author. Recognising that he could not prevent the book's reappearance, Lukács added a long and detailed preface describing its theoretical errors.

44 Lukács, Georg, *History and Class Consciousness – Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, Merlin Press, London, 1971, p.34

45 Ibid. p.85

46 Ibid. p.172

explains a wide range of apparently disparate phenomena...it is the historical moment by which we happen to be governed⁴⁷). But where Lukács had stressed society's oblivious acceptance of the commodity's logic, Debord's concept of choice had even less to do with economics; it instead simply sought to express a mode of *life* – considered as a generality – governed by an endless celebration of its own validity, and thus brought with it a departure from the actual reality and basis of class struggle.

The result was an effectively fetishized view of class struggle: and whilst Debord and the S.I.'s alliance with those who wanted more from the present necessarily entailed an allegiance with the labour movement, it remains the case that they had no theoretical grasp of its material basis. They affiliated themselves with class struggle, presented their ideas as its truth, and yet simultaneously effaced its real import. In this respect Debord's development of Hegelian Marxism can be read as a reversal of Marx's famous 'inversion' of Hegel: the materialist basis that Marx provided is replaced here with its own idealised image. Indeed, although Debord criticised the errors of abdicating historical agency to God, the Hegelian Spirit or the economy at every available opportunity, he nonetheless deified human history itself and at times presented it as if it was an entity in its own right.



5) Theory, practice and strategy

This takes us to Debord's problematic relation to Marx, and thus by a rather circuitous route to the merits of his account. He begins his celebrated fourth chapter of *The Society of the Spectacle* – in which he presents a history of the workers' movement – by describing the emergence of what he calls 'historical thought': a term which essentially refers to a conscious awareness of humanity's ability to shape its own history. This, he claims, first arose with Hegel's philosophy, which understood human self-consciousness to be the result of a historical process of development. Debord notes approvingly that for Hegel 'it was no longer a matter of interpreting the world, but rather of interpreting the world's transformation',⁴⁸ but complains that Hegel's work effectively observed the world as it seemingly shaped itself, and that it crowned and concluded that process by celebrating the existing (bourgeois) social relations of Hegel's time as constituting the culmination and truth of that historical process. Debord then discusses Marx's development and appropriation of Hegel's work, and makes clear that in his view Marx's great merit was not the 'scientific' technicalities of his economic works but rather his 'demolish[ing] of Hegel's *detached* stance with respect to what occurs.'⁴⁹

It would thus seem that for Debord the real nature of

Marx's work was effectively encapsulated in his most famous exhortation (and epitaph); namely, that: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.'⁵⁰ Marx's significance, for Debord, lies in his call to reclaim society's alienated powers and consciously shape history, as opposed to merely 'watching' as it seemingly made itself (or rather as the economy shaped it). He thus places enormous stress on the actualization of consciousness and on the relation between theory and practice. This, however, meant that he adopted a highly sceptical attitude to Marx's 'scientific' and economic work.

According to Debord (who was far more concerned with Marx's early writings than his later economic studies), 'for Marx it is the *struggle* – and by no means the *law* – that has to be understood.'⁵¹ He in fact held that Marx's concern with economic 'laws' constituted the weakest aspect of his work: 'The scientific-determinist side of Marx's thought was indeed what made it vulnerable to "ideologization."⁵² Debord's position is informed here by aspects of Lukács' writings (and indeed Marx's own), which claimed that the essential error of bourgeois thought was that it viewed a moment of history (capitalist society) as an eternal and natural truth. The attempt to define fixed, scientific laws for the operation of history and society, therefore, implied dogma and ideology.⁵³ In engaging with 'the fundamental science of bourgeois society, political economy,' Marx had been "drawn onto the ground of the dominant forms of thought,"⁵⁴ and 'it was [subsequently] in this mutilated form, later taken as definitive, that Marx's theory became "Marxism".'⁵⁵

Debord's relation to Marx's economics is of course marked by his understandable frustration with Communist Party orthodoxy and the ideology of economic determinism, but of interest here is the extent to which this conception of 'historical thought' demands the constant development of theory in relation to practice, and the perpetual rejection of fixed dogmas. Indeed, according to Debord, after Marx 'theory thenceforward had nothing to know beyond what it itself did'⁵⁶; Marx's famous 'inversion' of Hegel is thus effectively read as a reversal of past and future, in which the present moment would no longer be viewed as the conclusion of history (as is the case with Hegel) but rather as the genesis for its future development. 'History,' Debord claims, 'once it becomes real, no longer has an *end*,⁵⁷ and it is in this sense that he viewed the circularity of Hegel's system and its attempt at completeness as 'undialectical.'⁵⁸

Describing Hegel's philosophy as 'undialectical' may of course seem a little strange, but Debord does so as he interprets that philosophy as having reduced the true nature of history to the validity of a single historical moment. For Debord humans are essentially finite creatures, subject to the

50 Marx, Karl, *Theses on Feuerbach*, available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>

51 Op. Cit. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 52

52 Ibid. p. 54

53 It should of course be stressed that Marx's economic work was intended to do precisely the opposite: rather than describing the perfect harmony and eternal validity of capitalist society, Marx sought to demonstrate its historical contingency.

54 Ibid. p. 55

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid. p.51

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

47 Op. Cit. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, pp. 14-15

48 Ibid. p.49

49 Ibid. p.51

passage of time and limited in their awareness. The attempt to supersede such limitations through assuming that the illusions of religion, economics, metaphysics or political dogma constitute an eternal truth is to alienate one's own historical nature into a static, separate power to which one submits. Debord's entire oeuvre celebrates the finitude, temporality and uncertainty of human experience, and sought to reintroduce history into that experience through rejecting any such illusions.

This leads us to the significance of time in Debord's work. Time, for Debord, was the very essence of freedom; he claimed that it 'is a *necessary* alienation, being the medium in which the subject realises himself while losing himself, becomes other to become truly himself.'⁵⁹ Quoting Hegel, he stated that 'Man – that "negative being who is solely to the extent that he abolishes being" – is one with time.'⁶⁰ The human subject, in acting within time and thus differentiation, is a force that negates a given state of being; it changes it into a new state, and thereby negates and changes itself in turn. The important thing to note here is that if the negativity of the human subject is equated to the effectively endless negation of time, then the human must be defined by resistance to any immediate given, be that ideological dogma or concrete circumstance. This constitutes the basis for a permanent revolution, perpetually opposed to any a-historically static ideology or social structure. Rather than the completed, 'circular' dialectic of Hegelian philosophy, Debord proposes an endless process of self-determination and becoming.

This open-ended notion of conscious determination in time stood in complete contrast to the spectacle: 'The spectacle, being the reigning social organisation of a paralysed history, of a paralysed memory, of an abandonment of any history founded in historical time, is in effect a *false consciousness of time*.'⁶¹ The constructed situation, on the other hand, was defined as 'an integral ensemble of behaviour in time',⁶² a deliberate construction of lived experience in accordance with the desires of the experiencing subject. Situations were to be 'ephemeral moments', the 'success' of which 'can reside in nothing other than their fleeting effect.'⁶³ The point was thus to move with time and to make history, and in this sense the situation became one with the exuberance of the revolutionary moment; for example, the events of May 1968 were described later that year as 'a festival, a game, a real presence of people and of time',⁶⁴ and as 'an awakening to the possibility of intervening in history, an awareness of participating in an irreversible event.'⁶⁵

Two issues become apparent here, one negative and one positive. On the one hand, these aspects of Debord's work constitute the philosophical basis for the abstract humanism that creeps into his theory, and are what renders his development of Marxism so akin to its transformation into a form of existentialism. On the other hand, they also point towards the more relevant and interesting aspects of his

work: namely, his stress on praxis and on the constant, endless refusal of dogma and orthodoxy.

We saw that for Debord 'man' (sic) is 'one with time', and that consciousness can never supersede the finitude that this unity with the negativity of time brings. We've also seen that any pretensions towards a universal or absolute perspective on history is necessarily an illusion, and a denial of the temporal and transitive nature of human subjectivity. Consequently, if all such 'historical thought' is characterized by these limitations, and if it exists only to affect change within history, then it can only be valid in so far as it acts within the context that gave rise to it. Theory, in other words, is historically specific, and is 'true' only insofar as it is realized in practice; for example, according to Debord, '[Marx's] *Capital* is obviously true and false: essentially, it is true, because the proletariat *recognized* it, although quite badly (and thus also let its errors pass).'⁶⁶

A further corollary arises from this model: if the finitude of consciousness entails that 'historical thought' must always be a case of making decisions and acting on the basis of limited knowledge, it must therefore always be subject to chance and unknown factors. This is the reason for Debord's great passion for military theory and strategy.

Theory for Debord was always to be an intervention, and never an absolute: 'theories', he wrote, 'are only made to die in the war of time. Like military units, they must be sent into battle at the right moment; and whatever their merits or insufficiencies, they can only be used if they are on hand when they're needed. They have to be replaced because they are constantly being rendered obsolete.'⁶⁷ Consequently, for Debord radical theory is best understood as the formulation of pragmatic tactics, and as the theorisation of strategy. This can be seen again in the closing pages of *The Real Split in the International*; the S.I.'s final text, in which they heralded their own supersession:

The theory of revolution in no way falls exclusively within the domain of strictly scientific knowledge...the rules of conflict are its rules, war is its means, and its operations are more comparable to an art than to a piece of scientific research or a catalogue of good intentions. The theory of revolution is judged on the sole criterion that its knowledge must become a power.⁶⁸

This last line about knowledge and power is not a reference to Foucault, as might be supposed, but rather to Clausewitz,⁶⁹ whom Debord greatly admired and frequently referenced. The word 'power' comes by way of a translation of the original *Können* into *pouvoir*, and refers to a section of chapter 2, book 2 of *On War* entitled (in the present English translation) 'Knowledge must become Capability.' Here Clausewitz writes the following, in lines whose rejection of

59 Ibid. p.115

60 Ibid. p.92

61 Ibid. p.114

62 Op. Cit. Debord, 'Report on the Construction of Situations', p.49

63 Ibid. p.53

64 Situationist International, 'The Beginning of an Era', (first published in *Internationale Situationniste* # 12, 1969), in Op. Cit. Knabb p.289

65 Ibid.

66 Debord, Guy, Letter to Juvenal Quillet, November 1971, available at <http://www.notbored.org/debord-11November1971.html>

67 Debord, Guy, Script to the film 'In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni', 1978, in Knabb, Ken (Ed.), *Guy Debord – Complete Cinematic Works*, AK Press, Edinburgh, 2003, pp.150-1

68 Guy Debord, and Gianfranco Sanguinetti, *The Real Split in the International*, Pluto Press, 2003, p.62

69 In the Comments Debord writes that "For any intelligence service, following Clausewitz's accurate theory of war, knowledge must become power." Debord, Guy, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Verso, London, 2002, p.58.

separated knowledge must have appealed to Debord:

Knowledge must be so absorbed into the mind that it almost ceases to exist in a separate, objective way. In almost every art or profession a man can work with truths he has learned from musty books, but which have no life or meaning for him. Even truths that are in constant use and are always to hand may still be externals. ...It is never like that in war. Continual change and the need to respond to it compels the commander to carry the whole intellectual apparatus of his knowledge within him. By total assimilation with his mind and life, the commander's knowledge must be transformed into a genuine capability.⁷⁰

Similarly, Debord also distances himself from any theorist seeking to derive social change from contemplative study, and clearly states that revolutionary theory must be developed in tandem with the circumstances to which it seeks to apply itself. The centrality of praxis to Debord's theory allows for no conceptions that are not derived from and focussed upon activity and the actualization of the subject. Anything less leads to contemplation.

Sadly, the openness of this model stands in sharp contrast to Debord's own adherence to it; when the promised revolution failed to materialize, the optimism of 1967 developed into the rather more morose tone of his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988); and rather than take the position that his earlier analysis may have been flawed, Debord subsumed society's new defining features into an extension of his former presentation, which he termed the 'integrated spectacle'.⁷¹ He had not been mistaken in his analysis, he claimed; rather, the possibilities for revolutionary change had not been adequately pursued, and the spectacle had been allowed to tighten its grip. In this respect his theory's assumptions as to the complete development of social alienation in mid 20th Century consumer society, and as to the immanence of its revolutionary supersession, stand revealed as something similar to the 'closed' Hegelian dialectic that he had opposed: like Hegel, Debord effectively took his present circumstances to be the culmination of human (pre)history. Having viewed all revolutionary possibility as focussed at a particular historical juncture he increasingly came to see the decades beyond that point in terms of the spectacle's victory; and, in consequence, he effectively 'closed' his own dialectical model by refusing to acknowledge the new possibilities that those years might have offered. Debord's disinterest in economics and consequent failure to recognise the significance of the wage relation – which perpetually posits an antagonistic other to capital – not only led to a theoretical dead end, but also to an assumption of defeat and futility, and thus to the resignation, depression and withdrawal of his final years.

70 Clausewitz, Karl von, *On War*, Princeton University Press, New York, 1993, p.170

71 "The society whose modernisation has reached the stage of the integrated spectacle is characterised by the combined effect of five principal features: incessant technological renewal; integration of state and economy; generalised secrecy; unanswerable lies; an eternal present." Op. Cit. Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, p.12



Conclusion

In 1979 Debord declared: "I flatter myself to be a very rare contemporary example of someone who has written without immediately being contradicted by the event, and I do not mean contradicted a hundred or a thousand times like the others, but not once. I have no doubt that the confirmation all my theses encounter ought not to last right until the end of the century and even beyond."⁷² We reject this view, and suggest that it reflects a theoretical complacency and resignation that stands in direct contradiction to Debord's own assertions as to the need to develop new theory. It is an exercise in banality to point out that in present society our lives and subjectivities are shaped and affected by capital; and if this is to stand as the theory of spectacle's historical validation, then it remains a theory that tells us very little. This is because its focus is one-sided: the assumption that the alienation that underpins capitalist society can be understood in primarily subjective terms is based upon a failure to understand the objective significance of capitalist social relations. This, as we have argued, results in an inherently abstract notion of struggle.

We've seen that this mistake was similar to and derived from Lukács' own errors: Debord disregarded the objective alienation of labour power as a commodity sold within the wage relation, and based his account of society upon an ideological notion of alienation centred around its subjective effects. Capitalist production was thus understood as an abstraction derived from circulation and consumption; or, to quote Dauvé, Debord's analysis 'start[ed]... from a reflection on the surface of society...[and] made a study of the profound, through and by means of the superficial appearance.'⁷³ For us, the theory's consequent failure to deal with capital and class in an adequate manner resulted in an abstract notion of struggle; and it is this, we claim, that made Debord and the S.I.'s work so amenable to recuperation. We've also seen that this mistake eventually led Debord himself into depression and to an assumption of defeat. In order to gather these observations together and to thus bring our comments to a close, we might now note a form of recuperation frequently exercised upon Debord and the S.I. that exemplifies these issues: namely, the view – widely promoted by academic commentators during the previous decade⁷⁴ – that the implications of Debord's work were taken

72 Debord, Guy, Preface to the fourth Italian edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1979, available at <http://www.notbored.org/debord-preface.html>

73 Dauvé, Gilles (writing as Jean Barrot), 'Critique of the Situationist International', first published in *Red Eye* #1 (1979), available at <http://www.geocities.com/~johngray/barsit.htm#toc>

74 An example of the better work in this vein is Sadie Plant's *The Most Radical Gesture – The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (Routledge, London, 2000), whilst an indication of the apolitical vacuity that it can lead to might be found in Steve Best and Douglas Kellner's truly dreadful *Debord and the Postmodern Turn: New Stages of the Spectacle* (available online at <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/debordpostmodern.htm>)

to their logical conclusion by the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard.

Baudrillard's work during the 1980's⁷⁵ argued that the saturation of society with commodities had reached a point at which the true nature of social reality was no longer masked by the commodity's images, but was rather generated from them; any stable and authentic 'real' had thus been lost, and the distinction between capital and its opposition dissolved. Consequently, reading Baudrillard as the logical conclusion of Debord's work entails viewing Debord's complaints about the spectacular organisation of everyday life as a dawning, half-glanced realisation as to the impossibility of radical social change. This is of course the absolute opposite of Debord's own intentions; and yet the fact that it is possible to do so stands as a stark illustration of the problems inherent within the concept of spectacle.

The account of time, history and subjectivity that the theory of spectacle rests upon does, however, point beyond this post-modern dead end. In conceiving the human subject as a force that acts, changes and affects change, Debord presented an account that described that subject as always other and opposed to the world that it reacts to and acts upon. There is no such erasure of the 'real' or of an 'authentic' human subject as there never was such a pure, authentic and natural subject in the first place: as Marx stressed continually, and as Debord repeated when describing subjectivity (and yet seemed to forget when describing the spectacle), the human subject is not possessed of an immutable *a priori* essence but is rather always historically contextual. Within capitalist society the wage relation entails that this dialectical relation between subject and world is prevented from being a process of self-realisation, and instead becomes the real, objective alienation of oneself from one's own activity. When these issues are kept in mind, Baudrillard's political nihilism can be understood as the ideological reflection of a particular historical moment: as a failure to recognise the contingency of Western consumer capitalism (and indeed of capital as a whole) caused by a superficial focus on the commodity's appearances and subjective effects. And, if one can make that claim against Baudrillard, then one can also level it against the defeatism of Debord's later years, and indeed against the essential premise of the theory of spectacle: namely, the assumption that it is possible to define capitalist social relations under the rubric of their most 'stultifyingly superficial appearances', and to thus understand the objective alienation of labour on the basis of its subjective effects.

This is not to deny the impact that the S.I. have exerted upon protest movements and on the struggle against capitalism. The Situationist slogans that appeared upon the walls of the Latin Quarter in May 1968 are still readily adopted and employed,⁷⁶ and when this is considered in

relation to the abstraction that we have complained of it's tempting to suggest that Debord and the S.I.'s contributions should, in some respects, be understood as form of aesthetics rather than as revolutionary theory *per se*: their work provides a poetic and romantic notion of the motive for revolt, and of what a revolutionary movement should aspire towards, but ultimately offers little more than this.⁷⁷

As we have indicated, these problems seem to have been entirely missed by Retort, who claim that that the theory of spectacle allows one to grasp the true nature of modern society. Such problems also seem to have been ignored by the many other writers and commentators who have ensured that at least one of *The Society of the Spectacle's* assertions has received a form of historical verification: writing in 1967 Debord claimed, with undeniable accuracy, that 'Without a doubt the critical concept of the *spectacle* is susceptible of being turned into just another empty formula of sociologico-political rhetoric designed to explain and denounce everything *in the abstract* – so serving to buttress the spectacular system itself.'⁷⁸ The real problem however, as we have argued here, is that the theory was itself too abstract in the first place.

But whilst the theory itself may be of little use, the model of subjectivity, time and the relation between theory and practice that underlies it remains pertinent, interesting and relevant. Consequently, although we hold that the theory of spectacle should now be abandoned, we by no means suggest that the philosophy of praxis that it rests upon should be jettisoned along with it. These aspects of Debord's work have been almost universally ignored by academic commentators, but they hold far greater relevance to anyone seeking to answer the S.I.'s call for their own supersession than the theory of spectacle itself. In this respect we might close by thinking back one last time to Retort's trope of a council of war. Had Retort performed a closer reading of Debord's work they may perhaps have identified these issues, along with the conflation of strategic thought and radical theory that they entail. And, had they done so, they may have realised that the uncritical imposition of Debord's account onto today's society constitutes a similar mistake to that of a military leader, who regardless of changing circumstances, defeats, victories and reflection continues to use the same tactics in each and every engagement. It is in this respect that Debord and the S.I.'s exhortations as to the production of new theory in conjunction with practice are of far greater relevance than the theory of spectacle itself.



urn.pdf). Best and Kellner text argues for the relevance of Debord's work to the 'internet age'. Their account of an 'interactive' spectacle, that can be both oppressive and potentially emancipatory, leads them to claim that clicking one's mouse while sat in front of the computer screen constitutes '...the sort of subversive politics...that Debord promoted.' (Ibid.)

⁷⁵ See for example Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (University of Michigan Press, Michigan, 2006).

⁷⁶ One of these iconic slogans once caused the Brighton police force a degree of confusion at a Reclaim the Streets event; 'Beneath the paving stones, the beach!' was assumed to be a coded message signifying that the demonstrators had buried their equipment

beneath the pebbles of the beach.

⁷⁷ For example, the present English language edition of *The Revolution of Everyday Life* is 279 pages long, and yet the reader is hard pressed to disinter any serious theoretical content from the book's extended oratory.

⁷⁸ Op. Cit. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p.143

Direct action: A bloke's eye view

Review: *Birds, booze and bulldozers* by Peter Styles (Small World, 2007)



Lester Stype in his Brighton & Hove Albion replica football top at a generic anti-roads direct action in the '90s

This novel is a rather late addition to the literature that followed in the wake of the UK ('environmental') direct action movement of the 1990s. The movement has served to produce several different types of writing. First, activists themselves produced accounts, both political and autobiographical¹; we include our own articles in this.² Second, there were a number of academic accounts.³ Linking these two, there were later cross-overs – articles from activists who became academics.⁴ There were also works of fiction by established novelists who used anti roads and later anti-capitalist actions as the backdrop to their pot-boilers.⁵ *Birds, booze and bulldozers* is none of these. Or rather it

takes elements of each. It is a novel, yet it is also an argument for a particular perspective on the direct action movement, a perspective which has until now not been seen much in print.

Part of the interest for us in this book is that, since it is based on Peter Styles's own experiences of the No M11 and other such campaigns at the time (e.g. Newbury, the live export protests, Criminal Justice Bill actions, the Glasgow Pollock anti road campaign, and Reclaim the Streets), it overlaps with our own experience. There is the temptation to compare our own account of 'what really happened' to his. The selection of 'key moments' in the movement might be challenged too; while Lester Stype, the lead character, manages to find his way to almost all the big actions, certain obvious defining events (for us) aren't even mentioned – such as the Hyde Park riot against the Criminal Justice Bill of 1994.

Yet we've already had our say on the meaning of the anti-roads and direct action movement of the 1990s, so there is no point re-hashing that here. The reason for reviewing this book is that its truth and value lies in its ability to convey experiences that are largely absent from the existing literature. This is why this book is worth reading, both for those who were there and those who weren't but are interested in what it felt like at the times. Peter's is a perspective that has been lost amidst the well-meaning earnestness of his fellow protestors. The direct action scene, says Peter, through his character Lester Stype, meant fun, excitement and friendship: getting pissed, casual sex between people who had only just met, and failed relationships.

The title of the book is a deliberate dig at the political correctness (PC) Peter and his character feel have closed down certain topics – both at the time and in subsequent accounts. We would argue that the form of Lester's anti-PC rant is slightly off the mark – in the sense that 'laddishness' among fellow males is not the answer. But, in challenging the right-on lentil-weaving stereotype of the activist, Peter's

¹ E.g., Clare-zine (n.d.). *The end of the beginning: Claremont Road: E11 not M11*. (Clare-zine: Leeds). *Cultures of Resistance* (n.d.; London: The book factory). *Do or Die* #6 (n.d.) Merrick (1996). *Battle for the trees*. (Leeds: Godhaven).

² 'Auto Struggles: The developing war against the road monster' (*Aufheben* 3, summer 1994); 'Kill or chill? An analysis of the opposition to the Criminal Justice Bill' (*Aufheben* 4, summer 1995); and 'The politics of anti-road struggle and the struggles of anti-road politics - the case of the No M11 link road campaign'. (All are available from our website <http://libcom.org/aufheben>)

³ E.g., B. Seel, M. Paterson & B. Doherty (Eds., 2000), *Direct Action in British Environmentalism*. (London: Routledge). Barry, A. (1999). Demonstrations: Sites and sights of direct action. *Economy and Society* 28: 75-94. Butler, B. (1996). The tree, the tower and the shaman: The material culture of resistance of the No M11 Link Roads protest of Wanstead and Leytonstone, London. *Journal of Material Culture* 1: 337-363.

⁴ E.g., George McKay (Ed., 1998), *DiY culture: Party and protest in nineties Britain*. (London: Verso). Plows, A. (1995). Eco-philosophy and popular protest: The significance and implications of the ideology and actions of the Donga tribe. In C. Barker, P. Kennedy & M. Tyldesley (Eds.), *Alternative futures and popular protest: A selection of papers from the conference. Volume 1*. (Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University).

⁵ Ruth Rendall (1998). *Road rage*. (London: Arrow). Ian Rankin (2006). *The naming of the dead*. (London: Orion).

story is getting at something important. This is the way that the 'activists' were or could be 'ordinary people' (or rather ordinary young 'blokes and birds'). Activism is not just for middle class socialists and ideologically-committed hippies. It is no coincidence, perhaps, that we at *Aufheben* first met Peter not at barricaded squat on the route of the M11 link road but playing football at a park in Brighton. The accessibility, fun and pleasure of direct action is a vital point, then. 'Activism' is perhaps too often seen from the outside as a specialist activity and activists as a separate species.

However, Peter's own narrative demonstrates the contradiction of remaining 'an ordinary bloke' and yet becoming a full-time 'activist'. The story of Lester Stype suggests very strongly that direct action is for young (not older) people who haven't yet settled down, who have time on their hands and dole money in their pockets. Towards the end of the book, full-time activism burns Lester out, and he indicates that he will retire (although a come-back is also implied). The direct action lifestyle indeed promises a degree of sexual and chemical hedonism and a good laugh with mates. But it also involves real physical suffering, particularly for the most committed as they remain up cranes as long as possible for example, going without food and sleep, and suffer beatings from the police. Lester gets so stressed out that he becomes clinically depressed. There is nothing like the high of a successful action, but the lows, in terms of the personal costs, are a potential hazard.

Some of the other highlights of this book for us were Lester's anti-mysticism. For those who don't remember, mysticism of various sorts was absolutely rife in the hippy-

dominated anti-roads movement. For the middle class and middle aged looking for a radical alternative worldview to the alienated 'money-first' materialism of the roads programme, green spiritualism and nature worship fitted the bill. When the anti-roads campaign faded from Wanstead, for example, mysticism took its place for some of the people left behind. We shared Lester's dismay and despair. The novel also provides a nuanced treatment of the 'brew crew'. As we discussed in our previous articles, lunch-outs on the campaign can be a burden; but their lifestyle of constant drunkenness can be functional to a direct action campaign. Finally, Lester is committed to the movement ethos of 'non-violence' yet, as an 'ordinary bloke' rather than a pacifist ideologue, he is realistic about the limitations of this tactic in a number of one-on-one situations. That is, he sometimes loses his temper and threatens to retaliate.

We don't have to be precise on how representative Lester Stype is of the direct action movement of the 1990s to agree that his is an important untold story, a reflection of a real experience, yet one which is almost entirely absent not only in the academic accounts but also in much of the activist literature, which has tried to present a more serious, self-consistent and almost pious account of a time when people really did get their hands dirty. Looking back now, while that PC anti-sexist serious-mindedness was also a real reflection of aspects of the movement, without grit such as this, it would have been unbearably cloying. This is why we recommend this book and are only sorry that it wasn't published closer to the time of these events, when it could have been part of a much more live debate.



A Palestinian woman challenges Israeli bulldozer in a more contemporary image of direct action

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by Felton Shortall (Avebury, 1994)

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Aufheben

There is no adequate English equivalent to the German word *Aufheben*. In German, it can mean 'to pick up', 'to raise', 'to keep', 'to preserve', but also 'to end', 'to abolish', 'to annul'. Hegel exploited this duality of meaning to describe the dialectical process whereby a higher form of thought or being supersedes a lower form, while at the same time 'preserving' its 'moments of truth'. The proletariat's revolutionary negation of capitalism, communism, is an instance of this dialectical movement of supersession, as is the theoretical expression of this movement in the method of critique developed by Marx.